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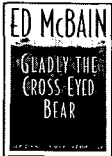
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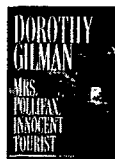
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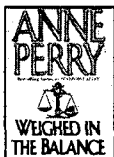
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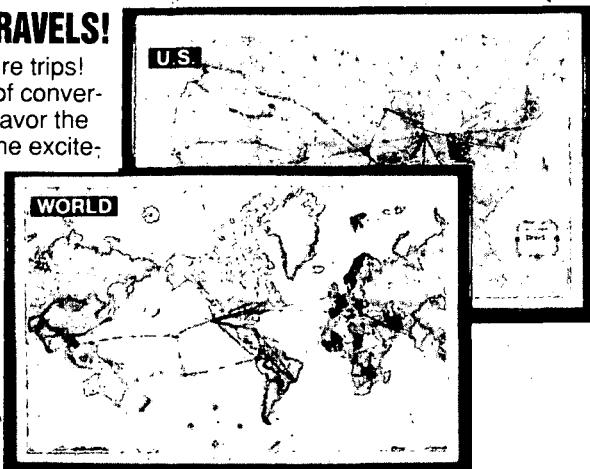
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

AHMM is pleased to introduce three authors new to us in this issue, two of them old hands in the writing business and one, Mary Ireland, with her first fiction publication. (Not only that, it was the first story she had ever submitted anywhere.) Ms. Ireland tells us that "about an hour before I received your letter telling me that 'Home in Time for Murder' had been accepted for publication, I signed a purchase agreement to buy my first house. I don't know whether the house is haunted, but I rather hope it is."

Both William John Watkins, author of "Machiavelli's Corollaries," and Michael Coney, author of "Catnap," come to us principally from the science fiction world. Mr. Watkins has written almost a dozen novels

and more than sixty short stories, the latter published in such magazines as *Asimov's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Twilight Zone*. In 1993 "Beggar in the Living Room" was a finalist for the prestigious Nebula award. A professor of humanities at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, he has also won awards for drama and poetry.

"Catnap" is Mr. Coney's first mystery story, but he has written more than forty science fiction stories and sixteen sf novels, one of which, *Brontomek!*, won the 1976 best novel award from the British Science Fiction Association. A financial consultant, he is a Chartered Accountant who was born in England but now lives in Canada. In the past he spent time running a pub in South Devon, the Malt-

(continued on page 156)

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FICTION

A Long and Happy Life

DeLoris Stanton Forbes



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/97

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Somebody said (dogs' years ago) the best reaction to falling off a horse is getting back on the horse and riding the heck out of him. That's what I did in essence when I went back to the very same hospital where my husband had died (they'd said, sorry, Mrs. Glenn, we've done all we can) and took a volunteer job as a Pink Lady. I didn't say anything about Victor's death (it happened in room 213; you can put me down as a firm believer in triskaidekaphobia, I avoid entering that room even to this day), and I couldn't see that they connected me with the hospital in any way, which was not surprising because Fairland General is a good-sized hospital and sometimes their left hand doesn't know what their right hand is doing, so do be careful when you check in via the emergency entrance. I mean, sure, doctors are only human and so are nurses and they can make mistakes, so don't take anything for granted, especially something simple-seeming like replacing a weakening pacemaker with a new improved model . . .

I'm rambling on, excuse me, please, I have to go. I'm delivering flowers to the third floor this afternoon, but first it's the book cart for the second floor; the men don't read as much as the ladies do, but what they do read

is more interesting I believe. I'll take thrillers and Westerns over the quote romance unquote novels that go so well with the gals any day. This is my usual routine, I cover a lot of ground in one afternoon. People say I'm the fastest Pink Lady in the west wing.

In room 201 we have Mr. Eberhardt and Mr. Burt. Mr. Eberhardt is postoperative. They've put his knee back together, and he's due to go home this weekend, even though he's certain that he can't manage with crutches and a brace, and believes he should stay a little longer in order to have more physical therapy, but his insurance company says, "I don't think so." Mr. Burt (colon problems; I have a hunch he's a tippler, his nose has that look if you know what I mean) has just come in and is feeling edgy as he waits for his surgery. "Good afternoon, Mr. Eberhardt, I've rounded up a Louis L'Amour for you. Have you seen this one?—it should be a quick read. Good afternoon, Mr. Burt, how about a Mickey Spillane? It's an oldie but goodie, so says Mr. Cooper in 207."

Mr. Cooper in 207 is a real character. Angie on the afternoon nursing shift says his trouble is prostate, but you wouldn't know it the way he carries on. He even flirts with me, calls me

an old cutie and an old sweetie, grabs my hand and pulls me down for a cheek kiss. I must confess that I don't find it offensive even though Mr. Foss, his recent roommate, told him to watch it or I'd file suit for sexual harassment, to which I replied, "Such foolishness, the way you two do carry on," at which they laughed and seemed pleased with themselves and that's all right with me. That's what I'm here for, to make patients feel better. That and to keep an eye on things. Just in case.

The man I felt sorriest for was poor Mr. Fallon in 220. His debilitating diabetes having reached a serious stage, they put him in here to try to get his sugar reregulated. Among his many troubles was a persistent problem with his feet. They were afraid of gangrene and I think that really frightened him, but the main reason I felt sympathy was because of his wife. Arlene Fallon is blind, she showed up daily; suddenly materializing at the visitor's desk. I never saw her come, she was just there, and one of us Pink Ladies took her up to visit her husband. She is one of those little women, petite in stature, in voice, in mannerisms, everything about her is small. I figure her for a size four shoe and a size two dress. I get the idea that Mr. Fallon, she called him

Ronnie, saw to her every need, even picked out her clothes, and she did look well turned out from tiny black patent pumps to the single strand of pearls (real, I believe) around her birdlike neck. She looked like Barbie the doll's grandmother if Barbie the doll had a grandmother, but since her mother (Barbie the doll's mother) was a plastic mold, even I can't envision a family tree. I say even I because my husband Victor used to comment that no Christian need perish in torment for me, and when I said what does that mean, for heaven's sake, he said, "Shaw said it in the Epilogue to *St. Joan*. He said, 'Must then a Christian perish in torment in every age to save those who have no imagination?'" Victor was very literary.

When Mrs. Fallon speaks, she sounds like a little radio girl (remember Fanny Brice?), and the thought crossed my mind that thirty or forty years (they're of the generation that married once and forever) of listening to that voice could have resulted in self-inflicted psychological deafness, but he always listened attentively and answered in soft, fatigued tones (at least when I was in the room), so it would seem his hearing and his patience were up to par. Anyway, she arrived promptly at ten A.M. each day and sat by his

bedside until five, when a man in a chauffeur's uniform showed up and took her away. I watched one day from the window at the end of the hall that looks out on the hospital entranceway and saw her departure. In a limousine yet. So I guessed they were well off, the Fallons. Financially, that is. I wonder how much money they'd have given if she could see and he hadn't come down with diabetes?

If I sound as though my gentlemen patients interest me more than my female charges, I must confess that they do. Except for Sara Dobbs. Women patients require less of my tender loving care, they are, by and large, more self-reliant, and since I enjoy being needed, I cater to the men. No matter how strong, how virile, they are, in the hospital they so often revert to the status of little boys, and it pleases me to mother.

I mention Sara Dobbs not because she is any less self-reliant but because she has the magic ingredient—imagination. She's a writer, she tells me. She is writing a screenplay. "It's a natural, honey. I can't understand why they haven't already done it. It's all about the *MASH* people twenty years later. You know, what happened to Hawkeye and B. J. and Colonel Potter and Margaret Houlihan and Radar. Especially Radar. I was

very taken with Radar, weren't you, honey? I mean, everybody was. *MASH* was the most popular TV show for the longest time ever, more beloved than *Gunsmoke* or *All in the Family* or Lucille Ball, sure they were all good, but *MASH* . . . it had laughter and tears, it had suspense, and everybody in it was so human, I mean there weren't any solid, one hundred percent heroes, you know, honey, except maybe Radar . . . and I just hated that Frank Burns, but by the end of his stay I'd begun to feel sorry for him and Klinger, Klinger was a real hoot, wasn't he, honey . . . ?"

She'd go on like that, she had every character memorized, she could tell me episode by episode what happened next. I found it rather amazing because of her ailment. Sara was in the hospital because her daughter claimed Sara was coming down with Alzheimer's or something along those lines. Sara's doctor, that was Dr. Edgars, he was a doll, not a Barbie doll but a real doll, wasn't sold on that idea at all, so Sara was in for tests.

If there was anything wrong with Sara's brain, I certainly couldn't put a name to it. We used to have long girl-to-girl chats. She didn't say much about her life outside the hospital, mostly she just went on about *MASH*. I told her all

about Victor and me, what a happy marriage we'd had, it was great to talk to someone about it, I guess I don't have many close friends. Not that I mind. It's better, I find, to sort of keep people at a short distance. Be friendly but be private, my best friend in my whole life was my husband. Sara was a perfect girl chum. I could see her when I wanted to, I could stay just as long as I wished. As long as we had something of interest to say to one another. I think she felt the same. I kept urging her to get on with her TV screenplay. It did indeed sound like a natural to me.

When I volunteered as a Pink Lady, I knew I'd be running in to Dr. Faubus. After all, the hospital was big but it wasn't that big, and he was a prominent physician, in line for chief of cardiology, I'd heard, but I'd schooled myself—no, schooled isn't the right word—I'd talked things over with myself and decided that encountering Dr. Faubus wouldn't disturb me in the least. After all, it wasn't as though he committed malpractice. He couldn't help it if the atria and the ventricles of Victor's heart fell totally out of coordination and brought on a Stokes-Adams heart block which led to loss of consciousness accompanied by convulsions just before Victor's sched-

uled pacemaker insertion. Dr. Faubus couldn't help it if he was out on the golf course when I called, frantically called I might add, for his help. He couldn't help it if I had failed to take a course in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and he couldn't help it if the paramedics got involved in an accident on the way to Victor, and he couldn't help it if Victor died when he was only sixty-two years old in this day and age when more and more people are living to be a hundred—just listen to Willard Scott on the *Today* show!—Dr. Faubus couldn't help it . . . I keep telling myself that. Dr. Faubus couldn't help it.

For the first few months I saw him seldom, passed him in the hall occasionally, a tall authority figure in his white coat (on nonoperating days) or green suit (postsurgery). He didn't recognize me, or if he did, he didn't acknowledge the recognition. Which was fine with me.

But then he turned out to be Mr. Fallon's doctor. It seemed that, in addition to his diabetes, Mr. Fallon had developed heart palpitations due his to vascular problems—that's what I gathered from the conversational bits and pieces I'd managed to string together. I'd overheard Dr. Faubus using his placate-the-patient voice tell Mrs. Fal-

lon, "It's nothing to worry about just now. I'm keeping a close watch on his condition, and I've instructed the nurses to call me immediately in any emergency." To which she'd replied in her I'm-ever-so-helpless tones, "I am so grateful, doctor. I have complete trust in you, I just know you'll be able to fix it so Ronnie can come home again. It's so hard without him. I just don't know what I'd do if I didn't have someone to depend on."

One day early this week I saved a book for Mr. Fallon, a new John Grisham thriller that I knew would interest him because I'd learned that Mr. Fallon was Ronald G. Fallon, Esquire, successful attorney-at-law, make that very successful attorney-at-law, which explained the limousine and the real pearls. "That's very sweet of you—" Mrs. Fallon never bothered to look in my direction when she spoke to me, I guess that was because since she didn't see she needn't bother "—but Dr. Faubus says he should use his eyes sparingly. The diabetes affects eyesight, says Dr. Faubus. He says Ronnie should ration his television viewing and

"My eyes are fine," Mr. Fallon interrupted. He spoke abruptly, surprising me because he was always so gentle when he spoke to her. I could understand his ir-

ritation. Confined to a hospital bed, one had to have some diversion. If she had her way, her husband would do nothing but lie there and listen to her. Maybe that was her purpose.

She was, I concluded, completely spoiled. His fault, of course, but still . . . I could understand his reasons. How long had she been blind, I wondered. Was she blind when he married her? If so . . .

"Thank you for the book," said Mr. Fallon taking it from my hesitating hand. "I should imagine it's much in demand. I'm most grateful."

"I saved it for you because you're a lawyer," I told him and seized the opening. "I know it's pesky, and I apologize, but may I ask you a legal question?" Bad manners, Bea, I thought. Like describing your symptoms to a doctor at a cocktail party.

"Of course." Any annoyance he felt, he hid. Mrs. Fallon bridled slightly and opened her mouth to speak, but I hurried on. "In the course of your practice, do you ever do any malpractice suits?"

His eyebrows rose. He was still a rather a nice looking man even though he was so very pale and had lost much of his hair. My husband had never lost his hair. He might have, I suppose, had he lived long enough, but I doubted it. He had such thick,

wavy, brown, still brown at sixty-two, hair. I loved to touch it, to feel it, to run my fingers through . . .

"No, I don't. I specialize in corporate law." He warmed his tone, "Have you some problem requiring a trial lawyer?"

I smiled reassuringly. "No. No, I was merely asking. For a friend. I told her I didn't think you were that sort of lawyer. I couldn't imagine you appearing in one of those ads on TV . . ." I smiled to show the foolishness of the mere possibility.

"Really, miss . . ." Mrs. Fallon was obviously irritated, she even bothered to glance in my direction. "My husband is ill, and you are imposing."

"Yes. I'm sorry. Do excuse me. Have a good day, Mr. Fallon. Mrs. Fallon. I'm on my way." I'd been out of line, I knew. Why I'd even bothered to bring up the subject I had no idea, Dr. Faubus couldn't be sued for playing golf, could he? Of course not. My question was a result of my controlled—I thought—animosity toward Dr. Faubus. You'll have to do better than that, Bea, I told myself. So I faced facts and came up with a new idea.

As I wheeled my my cart out of the room in what I hoped was a dignified exit, I collided with none other than Dr. Faubus. "Watch it!" he barked and almost pushed me aside. He

should have said, "Sorry," because he was the one who'd run into me, but no, of course not. Dr. Faubus could do no wrong.

I had a fact to face, so I faced the fact. I hated Dr. Faubus. I faced the fact that I firmly believed Dr. Faubus was the cause of Victor's death. I faced the fact that until I did something to avenge Victor's death I would sour my disposition and even undermine my mental health. I faced the fact that I would have to come up with a plan, a successful plan, for my inner satisfaction. That's when the idea came to me.

If I could see to it that Mr. Fallon passed away . . . he was going to die anyway, wasn't he? Sooner or later? He looked so sad, so tired, he looked as though he would welcome death. I thought I saw a look in his eyes that said, "I'm ready. Come and get me." If Mr. Fallon died in such a way that Dr. Faubus would be blamed for it, then Mrs. Fallon (if I knew her) would find a malpractice lawyer all right. Mrs. Fallon would be a wonderful witness in a court of law, the tiny little widow, the little handicapped widow—my God, they'd take all the doctor's money, they'd take away his license, maybe they'd even put him in jail. One way or another, Dr. Faubus would be done for, Dr. Faubus would pay.

The only problem now was how, I caught my reflection in the hospital comfort station mirror. My eyes were sparking, my face was pink like my smock, I didn't look like myself at all. I sighed, shook my head at myself. This was all theoretical, of course. An exercise in plotting. To exorcise my demons. One demon. In a white coat. A scheme not to be taken seriously, not at all.

I went to my friend Sara for theoretical help. "How's the play coming, Sara?" I asked. "I'd love to see what you've written."

Sara looked blank, and I thought, maybe she does have Alzheimer's after all. "I'm blocked," she said. "I got this pad of paper and a six-pack of Bic pens, and I'm blocked. I can't seem to get started. All I think about is the way they were on *MASH*, but when I try to think about them now, I'm blocked."

"Oh. Well, maybe all you need is an idea. Let's see, you said you disliked that Dr. Burns . . ."

"Yeah. But he's such a wimp; to tell the truth, he's not a very interesting character. I'd rather do one of the others. Like Radar. I was really crazy about Radar."

"Well, maybe Radar became a doctor . . ."

She shook her head of lank gray hair. "Radar wasn't that well educated. It isn't that he wasn't smart, he just didn't have

the background. Course, he could have become a male nurse."

"That's it. A male nurse. And he works in this hospital . . ."

"Yeah. That could be. Maybe with Hawkeye. The same hospital with Hawkeye."

"And this Hawkeye, he was a doctor, wasn't he? Right. He could have caused the death of a patient through malpractice and Radar knows it . . ."

She shook her head again, this time with vehemence. "Hawkeye wouldn't do that. He just wouldn't. It won't sell. Never."

"Well, how about another doctor? Somebody with an attitude, you know, like Dr. Faubus, for instance. Have you run into Dr. Faubus? I use him as an example because he's so full of himself he strikes me as the kind of doctor who would make a mistake and never own up to it. Isn't there a doctor that it could happen to—because of arrogance? In *MASH* wasn't there some full-of-himself doctor from Harvard . . . ?"

"Dr. Winchester! Yes. That could be. Arrogant is the word for Dr. Winchester. Hawkeye and Radar and Dr. Winchester could all be at the same hospital, so Radar tells Hawkeye about Dr. Winchester . . ."

"But how would Dr. Winchester kill his patient? And how

could Radar find out? That's what we've got to figure. How did he do it? So Radar could prove it?"

Sara cocked a grackle eye at me. "Doctor kills patient, that's your idea? You figuring the viewers will eat up the malpractice bit? Seeing as how they're already mad at the medics on account of high health costs? But that calls for lawyers, and the public's down on doctors and lawyers. I don't know . . ."

"I think you're wrong there. On both counts. The public loves doctors, look at the hospital shows on TV. But they especially like it when a doctor gets into a jam, it pays back for all the times they've had to wait for an appointment and the high price of health care and all the pain . . ."

"You don't go for the image of the doctor as God? You've had a problem with the AMA? Or with one M.D.? That Dr. Faubus?" She swung her legs over the side of her bed, tugged at her hospital gown for decency's sake. "Tell me more, lady. Maybe we can work it in . . ."

"I'm going to have to kick you out, Mrs. Glenn," said Ms. Freeble, R.N. and boss lady on Sara's floor. "Sara's got to go down to X-ray for another scan."

"See you tomorrow, Sara." I waved goodbye. "You think

about it. You'll have that white pad filled in no time."

"White pad?" I heard Ms. Freeble ask as I went out into the hall.

"I'm writing my will," I heard Sara tell her. "I'm cutting my daughter off without a cent . . ."

Leaving for the day, I borrowed a volume from the hospital library. Diabetes was the subject of a section. I decided a little knowledge might indeed be a dangerous thing—for Dr. Faubus. (Theoretically, of course.) I looked up diabetes mellitus, which "becomes increasingly common with age." The cause, it seems, is when the pancreas' output of insulin is insufficient for the body's needs. The article said that the effectiveness of modern treatment has changed this often fatal disease into one from which deaths are extremely rare. "However," it went on, "there are still risks." I paid close attention. Insulin-dependent diabetics (Mr. Fallon) risk falling into diabetic coma when the body uses fat as a substitute for glucose to provide energy, which causes poisonous substances called ketones to form as a byproduct. Complications include diabetic retinopathy (an eye disorder—aha!), peripheral neuropathy (a nerve disease), chronic kidney failure, and atherosclerosis with its at-

tendant risks of stroke and heart attack—oh yes. Diabetics cannot eat sugar, candy, cake, jam, etc. Yeah, yeah, everybody knows that. And they should avoid sugar-sweetened drinks . . . another given. But “even if you keep strictly to your diet, you may find that your tests show your condition to be worsening, in which case your physician may prescribe hypoglycemic tablets, which lower blood sugar, but some tablets may have unpleasant side effects; in that case another type of hypoglycemic tablet may be prescribed. . . . Hypoglycemia” (low level of glucose in the blood and the opposite of diabetes mellitus) “may come from overdoses of insulin, not keeping to one’s diet, or unusually strenuous or prolonged exercise, and may result in convulsions and coma; hence the treating physician will give you an injection of glucose in a vein in your arm.” An injection of glucose in a vein in your arm. Hmmm. I’d read through all that and maybe found my answer at the tag end. A shot of glucose in the arm. Interesting. And Mrs. Fallon couldn’t see.

I was reading at the desk in my living room. There is a mirror hanging on the wall over the desk, and I looked up and saw myself in that mirror then, saw my new self, Bea Glenn as Dr.

Jekyll turning into Hyde. I slammed the book shut. I was overly warm, my forehead was damp, my eyes were shining, no, not shining, gleaming. An unholy gleam. I shut the gleam off, I told the mirror to “Stop this! Stop this right away.” I threatened the mirror, “If you can’t behave yourself, you’ll have to quit the Pink Ladies. And you know you enjoy being a Pink Lady, you know you do. So straighten up and fly right . . . slow down, baby, don’t you blow your top!” Words to an old song, Victor used to sing that old song . . . Victor would be so ashamed . . . I groaned and went to bed, where I dreamed ugly dreams at first but by morning sweet dreams. Victor and I were floating down a river in a canoe, it was sunset, and the sky was filled with such divine colors, gold and pale gold, almost silver, and orange becoming coral turning to peach. Then blue-gold, fade to black.

Mr. Burt greeted me with a message. “A woman’s been looking for you. She’s a patient. Old dame with gray hair. Looks like a witch.”

And from Mr. Cooper, “Hello there, sweetie pie. Old gal named Sara’s been asking for you. Give me a kiss, girl, I’m all alone now.” He gestured to the adjacent empty bed. “Fossy’s gone.”

"Mr. Foss—oh yes, your roommate—he's passed on?"

He made a face. "Nah. Gone home. Come on, sugar. Just a little kiss. You know the song, just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down . . ."

But Sara wasn't in her room, her room was empty. Ms. Freeble, sought out, had the answer. "Dr. Edgars sent her to Pinevale," she told me. "She'd started fantasizing. Something about murder in a hospital. She had you involved in it for some reason. Some wild tale about somebody named Radar and a diabetic patient. You shouldn't get so chummy with the patients, Mrs. Glenn. Sometimes you give out the wrong message, you know. Leave the nursing to the professionals, please. We know what we're doing."

"Sorry," I said and almost trotted away. Maybe I needed a stay at Pinevale. Whatever had I been thinking? Out of my mind, that was it. Just plain out of my mind.

The corridor in front of Mr. Fallon's room was blocked. A gurney stood outside, there were people in the doorway, nurses and orderlies, over their heads I got a glimpse of a green operating cap. Someone was weeping, *waa, waa, waa* like a child. To me, standing outside, it was like a tableau, everyone frozen until my arrival, and then, as though

I'd thrown the switch, everyone moved. Two orderlies came for the gurney, wheeled it inside. At the end of its path I saw Dr. Faubus, and Dr. Faubus saw me. For the first time, it seemed, he recognized me. He knew who I was, I could tell by the look in his eye, and I thought, oh dear God, he knows everything. He knows of my plan, my abandoned plan, he knows my feelings.

I backed away from the door. A cluster of hospital people moved out, at their core Mrs. Fallon. She was the weeper, and I knew that Mr. Fallon was dead. It was Mr. Fallon they were loading on the gurney, it was his body they were bringing out on the gurney escorted by Dr. Faubus, an angry Dr. Faubus, I could almost smell his fury. I let them all go by, then caught the arm of a nurse who trailed the procession. "What happened?"

She looked blank for a moment, then shrugged. "Embolism," she said. "Dr. Faubus said it was an embolism." She looked ahead to make sure everyone was out of earshot. "He's wild, claims somebody gave the patient an overdose of glucose. Heads are gonna roll." She rolled her eyes to show how. "Thank God I never went near the man today. Dr. Faubus can be a holy terror."

I took a deep breath, swallowed, and thus controlled my stomach acid. "What about his wife?" I asked. "She's blind, isn't she? What will happen to her?"

The nurse, her nametag said Connors, shrugged again. "Family Services will take over. Me, I've got patients to attend to. Calm them down. Some of them are sure to know what's happening . . ."

Mr. Fallon's room was empty now. His blood pressure cuff dangled from its tubing; on the table beside the bed was the Grisham book I'd left him. My knees felt weak, I sank into Mrs. Fallon's chair. Guilty as sin, said my head. The old Chinese curse, be careful what you wish for, you might get it. Guilty as sin.

Staff was returning, I could hear them coming down the hall. As I picked up the Grisham book, two nurses in conference with Nurse Connors passed. I could hear one of the nurses saying, "I hate it when we lose one, but I try to think of it this way: he lived a long and happy life . . ."

"That's dumb, Shirley," said Nurse Connors. "How do you know his life was . . ." I added the Grisham book to my collection and went back down to Mr. Burt and Mr. Cooper, who were not, so far as I knew, on the verge of dying.

But when I told him, Mr. Burt said, "Ah well, he lived a long and happy life."

I could have slapped him.

I think I knew they were police before anybody else. They came, two of them, in semi-uniforms of blue blazers and tan pants, Florida's idea of plainclothes, the day after Mr. Fallon died. (Guilty as sin; guilty as sin, said the litany in my head.) They talked to the nurses. They prowled around the corridors. They even chatted with patients. I heard through the grapevine that they had a long conference with Dr. Faubus. (He's getting his, he's getting his! Shut up, shut up, guilty as sin.)

They even cornered me. They introduced themselves, Detectives Beaumont and Laird, they said. Beaumont was tall, Laird was shorter. Other than that they looked a good deal alike. Maybe it was the blue blazers? They had a few questions, they said. They'd heard I spent a lot of time on this floor. They'd heard that I spent a lot of time in Mr. Fallon's room.

"But I didn't," I protested. "No more than in anyone else's. Who told you that?"

It seemed Mrs. Fallon thought I spent a lot of time in Mr. Fallon's room.

Oh dear. Could the little bird lady be jealous?

"I don't think I spent more time there than anywhere else. I just took him a book now and then. And a cheery word. He was a very sick man. You say you have questions, I have a question. Why are you here? I mean, the poor man passed away. A heart attack. A natural way of dying, he had a heart problem. Why are the police interested in that? Unless you think the doctor . . ."

"It's because of the doctor that we're here," said Beaumont. "Doc Faubus says somebody caused the heart attack. We're trying to find out if he's right."

"Somebody caused . . . what does he mean? How could anybody cause . . . ?"

"Doc Faubus says the deceased got an overdose of glucose."

My heart threw in an extra beat for good measure. "An overdose. Oh dear. Some nurse . . . ?"

"None of the regular nurses gave him a shot of any kind. They all swear to it. We're trying to locate another nurse, maybe she's private, maybe she's from another floor, although there's no record of any Nurse Houlihan on the hospital's roster. Mrs. Fallon says some nurse named Houlihan came into her husband's room

came into her husband's room that afternoon . . ."

"Houlihan?" Nurse Houlihan.

"Doc Faubus and the hospital are walking on eggs with the lady. Seems she plans to instigate a suit against the doc and the hospital, she's talking about F. Lee Bailey."

"Nah," said Laird. "Not Bailey. Dershowitz."

"Whatever," said Beaumont. "She's a tough one, that little old gal. Looks like a parakeet, screeches like a . . ."

"Ha," said Laird. "Screeches like a parrot. Ever hear one of those parrots squawk? They got one out to the zoo that'll break your eardrums. My kids drag me out there every other week, I swear I'll take to wearin' ear plugs. You know, those birds live to be like a hundred years old, you know that? Long lives, those parrots. As long as somebody takes care of them. Long and happy lives."

Nurse Houlihan. They were walking away from me, they were almost out of earshot. I took a deep breath. "I think," I said softly, "you'd better check out Pinevale. The sanitarium. To see if a patient named Sara Dobbs is still there."

They didn't hear me, they were almost at the end of the hall.

What could they do to her anyway? Put her in an institution?

But suppose they believed she knew what she was doing? Knew right from wrong (wasn't that the insanity rule)? Then they could try Sara Dobbs and find her guilty of murder and even send her to the electric chair. Old Sparky. That's what they call it. Old Sparky.

And she could implicate me. Couldn't she? Wasn't there some sort of crime called aiding and abetting?

Then, too, what if Mr. Fallon *wanted* to die? Facing possibly years of incapacitation and all the while having to listen to Mrs. Fallon's high-pitched piping monotone . . .

I needed to think, I needed to think about the right thing to do, I needed to go home and think . . .

Just then, as I reached that sensible conclusion, Dr. Faubus came into the hall, appeared at the same far end where the police had gone, came toward me.

And before I could stop myself, I called out, "Dr. Faubus!"

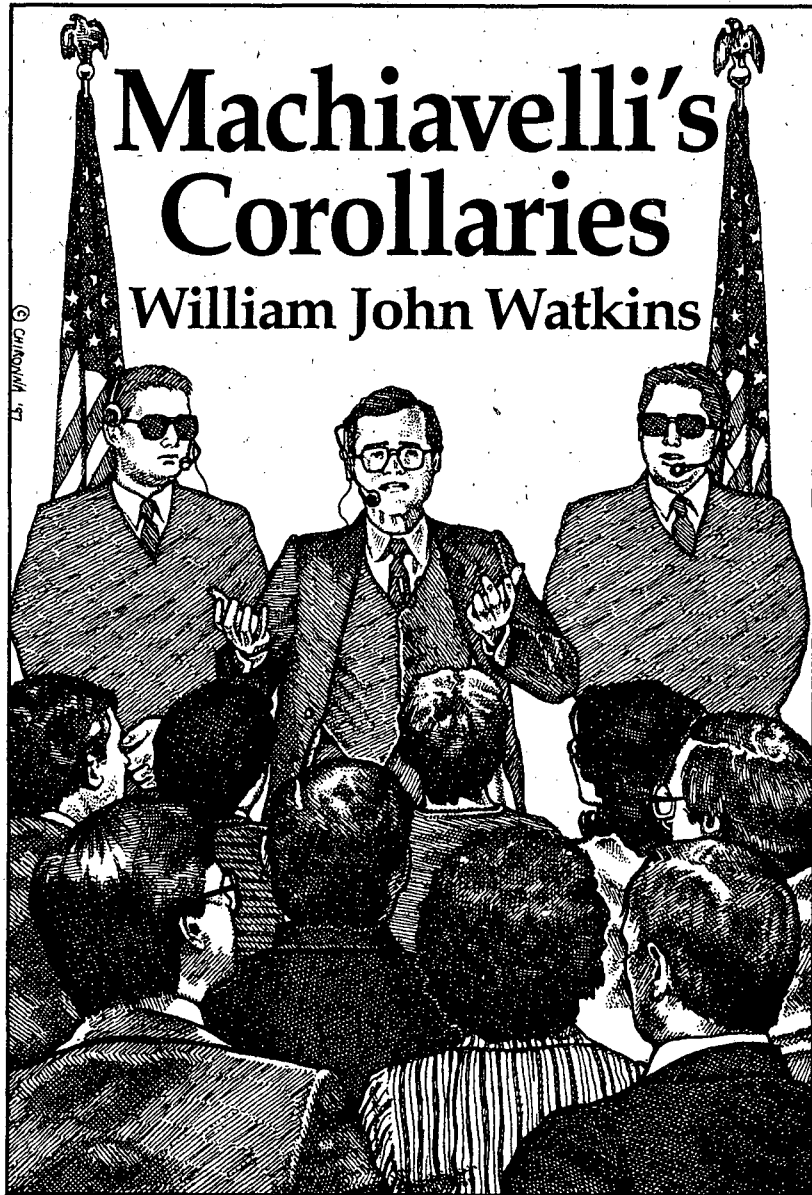
He walked right by. He brushed right past me as though I weren't there at all. I watched him stride off down the hall, he was a big man, something about the way he moved made me think of bulldozers. He passed through the double swinging doors at the far end, they went *slaaaap, slaaap, slaap, slap* . . .

I stood there a few minutes before turning my cart around and heading for the elevators. I had work to do up on the third floor (books for Mrs. Egbert and Miss Donatelli, flowers for Mr. Ponsonby, who'd come out of surgery that very morning), and time was a-wasting. But I had lots of time to think about Mr. Fallon and Sara Dobbs and Dr. Faubus . . . all the rest of my (probably) long and happy . . . happy? . . . all the rest of my probably long (considering what medical science can do today) life.

Machiavelli's Corollaries

William John Watkins

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“**T**here is, of course, no cause for alarm,” he said.

I find it hard to believe a man wearing a tie when he says things like that. I find it even harder when he is in the process of wetting his pants and doesn't even notice. Personally I think the only people who really know whether there's cause for alarm are wearing lab coats, or more likely coveralls, and are kept away from the press at all costs. It's rare that they let *anybody* who knows the truth talk to the press. Machiavelli's Second Law: "Never lie to the press." Machiavelli's Corollary: "Lie to somebody with an honest face and let *them* lie to the press. They won't know they're lying, so it won't sound like a lie." I don't know exactly where he said that, but I know it's in *The Prince* somewhere.

Whoever had put this guy up in front of us clearly had not read Machiavelli. I think that was the scariest thing. That someone had sent this guy out to calm us down. If the lie they told him was *that* terrifying, what must the truth be like?

I don't think anybody heard a word he said anyway. I know I didn't. I was too busy watching that dark stain spread down the front of his five hundred dollar suit and into his socks, his shoes, the carpet on the podium. I waited for it to soak through and start dripping onto the floor beneath, and it was all I could do not to lean down and try to look underneath the platform. It was only a foot or so off the ground, so it would have been too dark under there to see anything anyway. I thought about listening for it, like a leaky sink any night you absolutely have to get up two hours earlier than usual. It was quiet enough. I don't think anybody was even breathing.

If it weren't that the Cold War was over, we'd all have been sure he was going to tell us that missiles were already in their downward arc heading for Washington. But nobody worried about that kind of thing any more. I suppose if some White House press secretary had had to come before us and say, "The president is dead. Vice President Quayle is now the president," he might have reacted that same way, but that nightmare was well behind us, too. So nobody knew what to expect, and that's always a scary state of affairs.

What scared me was that this guy wasn't even the White House press secretary. When the government has a lie to tell you, and even when it doesn't, anybody with some training in the law will do, but for a really big lie, or a really important one, they send out the true professional. This guy wasn't even a talented amateur. The first thought that crossed my mind was that everybody in authority was dead of unknown causes. Or worse yet, of *known* causes nobody

could do anything about. And somebody had sent this guy out to cover it up.

He *did* have an honest face. Terrified, but honest. His eyes kept going around the room like he was looking for questions, but he was really looking for answers and nobody had their hand up, not even to ask him to repeat what he'd just said. They weren't even turning to ask one another. It didn't matter. He said it again anyway: "There is no cause for alarm." This time he added something. "However, for the next hour, no one is allowed to leave this room."

Everybody immediately looked at the doors. They were all closed, and in front of each one there was a very burly guy in a government-issue suit, standing with his hands clasped in front of his crotch like they were all posing for a team picture. They were wearing those astronaut mikes that wrap around in front of your mouth like a piece of shoestring licorice, and they had those little black earplugs that mean they're getting orders from somewhere else. I don't think anybody had been planning to leave at that point, but the surest way to make people want to do something they didn't otherwise want to do is to tell them they can't. Especially reporters. Somebody actually jumped up and said, "You can't do this to us!"

The spokesguy never even heard her, or if he did, he didn't acknowledge it. He just went right on talking. "Twenty years ago, in a joint venture sponsored by all the intelligence agencies, work began on an infallible truth serum. That work has borne fruit." He sounded like he was reading it, but he had nothing in front of him, not a teleprompter, not a piece of paper, not even a lectern. He did have one of those ear things, so I figured he was just repeating what somebody else was saying in his ear. It made you wonder what lie the professionals didn't trust their voices enough to tell in person. Then a scarier thought followed that one. I wondered if the truth was so incredible that they knew none of us would believe the professionals if they told us they were telling the truth. They were probably right.

The spokesguy droned on. He spoke in a flat Midwestern monotone without gestures and without much in the way of facial expression either. That was apparently supposed to make him seem more truthful. We'd all seen so many people who could smile like they were really glad to see you that *any* kind of emotion was suspect. But all it did was make him seem like a moderately ugly anchorman. "Eventually," he said, "a stress-related hormone was discovered in the blood of people who had just told a lie. The larger the

lie, the greater the amount of hormone. Researchers named the hormone Prevaracoid."

I thought "Nixonite" or "Senatorium" would have been better, or even "Lawyeroid." We were certainly going to have a field day coming up with a popular nickname for Prevaracoid. If you come up with the right name for a thing, it's better than a scoop. I could almost hear the *Time* magazine guys reaching for their electronic thesauruses and shifting their minds into Alliteration Mode.

"Prevaracoid," the spokesguy said, "was difficult to isolate even in blood samples, and a definitive answer as to whether someone was lying required several retests and took as much as twenty-four hours. Moreover, if a lie was told within five minutes prior to being asked the test question, Prevaracoid levels were increased and often masked any subsequent response given to the test question. A method was needed for determining the ongoing amount of Prevaracoid in the blood without taking blood samples or waiting for an analysis."

You could see the problem there. All somebody would have to do to make the test results invalid was to tell an obvious lie at the beginning of the interrogation. What I wondered was where they got enough people in Washington who could go without lying for five minutes to carry out the tests. I made a mental note to ask that if he threw things open for questions from the floor. I had a feeling he wouldn't. He was barely pausing for breath for fear somebody would slip a question in before he was finished. "The search for this method took several years, and only recent breakthroughs in gene splicing that led to methods of treating disease via an aerosol of antibodies made ongoing measurement possible. Prevaracoid breaks down quickly in the body, and the search for its antagonist finally turned up another hormone named Anti-prevaracoid."

The sheer inventiveness of science has always fascinated me. Here were people who could find the body's darkest secrets, and they named the most important substance they would ever discover Anti-prevaracoid. You wonder how anybody that dull could invent anything. But apparently they had, because the spokesguy was well into explaining it. It seemed that Anti-prevaracoid ate up Prevaracoid. But the problem wasn't to get rid of Prevaracoid, it was to measure it. So they modeled another molecule that looked like Anti-prevaracoid and attached to Prevaracoid in the same way but didn't dissolve it. I didn't see the usefulness of that right away, but the spokesguy saved me the trouble of figuring it out.



"When a radioactive marker, like the ones used in many current medical tests, was attached to Anti-prevaracoid molecules, it became possible to measure concentrations of Prevaracoid from outside the skin. If the radioactive markers were increased in strength sufficiently, Prevaracoid concentrations within the body could be measured at a distance," he said.

He didn't have to tell me what that meant. All you had to do was get the radioactive Anti-prevaracoid into a few suspects, put them in a room, and watch the inside of their bodies on your monitors, and you'd know who was guilty. And if you had a way to sneak it into people without their knowing it, there wouldn't be a negotiation you couldn't win because you'd know every time your adversary lied. Somehow I knew he was going to tell us they'd found a way to do just that. And he did.

He said, "Subsequently, a method for introducing the Anti-prevaracoid tag surreptitiously was perfected. The radioactively tagged hormone dispersed in an aerosol in a relatively enclosed space would be breathed in by anyone present, making them thus unable to lie without detection. The potential of this technique in matters of national security is obvious."

"National security" made me sweat. Every time the government wants to defend an atrocity, it starts out the sentence with "National security . . ." Somehow I knew there were going to be side effects. And I was right.

The spokesperson laid them out for us one by one. "The new technology was not without risks. Increased radioactivity levels to allow remote monitoring increased the risk of cancer hundreds of times. However, it was argued that, in specific instances, the benefit to national security outweighed those risks. If the interrogation of a terrorist using Anti-prevaracoid prevented a bombing, the terrorist's dying a few years earlier because of cancer was deemed an acceptable risk."

Not to mention that the agencies could deny ever using it, since their victims would look like they'd died of natural causes. What worried me was that they were *telling* us all this. Either we were never getting out of that room or something had happened to make the technique unworkable. I was rooting for superspy failure.

"Even early in the research certain researchers pointed out these and other dangers but were ignored. Some, unwilling to force others to take those risks, or fearing that Anti-prevaracoid would be used surreptitiously on themselves to test their loyalty, quit the project.



Others stayed but worked in a subversive way to prevent the project's completion. Subsequent delays and failures in the project caused the use of Anti-prevaracoid in the interrogation of almost all of the staff, some of whom died within weeks of their exposure. These fatalities were attributed to a particular susceptibility to radiation in that segment of the exposed population."

When the government starts telling you, even in scientific terms, that it has killed its own people, either it has changed its very nature or it doesn't expect you to live to tell the tale. Everybody started looking at the doors again. You knew those guys were armed, but if we all rushed them at once, at least some of us might get out. But you have to organize a thing like that, and nobody wants to be the first one to get shot. We all wanted to believe we were going to get out of there alive anyway if we just heard him out. And he told us just what we wanted to hear. The room was buzzing, and he seemed to notice it for the first time.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press corps. There is no cause for alarm. This information is being declassified and will be widely disseminated. Your hearing it first puts you in no personal danger." He sounded like he believed it, and we wanted to believe it was true, so we believed him. "If I may go on," he said.

Nobody said anything to stop him. I suppose we were all afraid he'd change his mind. He went back to his monologue. "Fatalities were at first identified as stemming from the high levels of radiation in the radioactive marker, but it was subsequently found that in order for Anti-prevaracoid to find and deactivate Prevaracoid, it first had to identify Prevaracoid. This was done through the use of an antibody that attached itself to Prevaracoid and acted as a sort of homing device for Anti-prevaracoid. A new aerosol was developed which contained much lower levels of radiation and which attached itself to the antibodies instead of to the Prevaracoid molecule. Concentrations of the antibodies gave the same results but with less exposure to radiation."

It didn't seem to me to be good news that they'd invented the ultimate lie detector. It was certainly going to put a crimp in romance, and the Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination was finished because the Reagan-packed federal court system was certainly going to legalize its use. The "however" gave me a little hope.

"However," the spokesguy said, "the antibodies were far more sensitive to radiation than the individual cells, and they mutated

rapidly with the result that the new spray was lethal within an hour."

It was beginning to sound like the prosecution in a war crimes trial. Obviously they had killed some more people.

"To put it bluntly," he said, "once you have breathed in AP1, as the aerosol was called, *if you lie, you die.*"

It seemed to me that in the case of a large percentage of the people working in Washington it wasn't too extreme a punishment. Apparently some of the researchers thought so, too.

"Use of the aerosol was banned immediately, even in the case of foreign nationals," he said. "However . . ."

It's those "however's" that kill you. But it turned out it wasn't us who'd been killed. Not exactly anyway.

"... disgruntled researchers stole the formula. And have released it here today. And have also released it in Congress and at the White House. And at all the foreign embassies."

I was willing to bet there wouldn't be a person alive on the Hill by sundown, and nobody in the diplomatic community within two days. I liked some of the senators, I even liked a couple of the lobbyists and the press agents, but on the whole, and thinking only in the abstract, it wasn't such a bad idea.

"In fact," he said, "the group claims to have released the aerosol all over the world in every major capital, in every governing body. In all the seats of power."

The sheer loss of life involved made me rethink how good a thing it was. It seemed to me we could be looking at millions of dead by the end of business. Much as I despised a government based on lies, I wasn't sure capital punishment was called for.

"The rapidity with which the aerosol works depends on the frequency and magnitude of the lies. Even the most accomplished liar, even sociopaths who seem to have no conscience at all, still release the stress hormone Prevaracoid. In essence, how fast the aerosol works depends on how much stress a given lie or series of lies produces in the subject. Some people might be able to go on lying at fairly high levels for days, but few, it is expected, will be able to continue to do so at length for months."

It seemed to me that, if he was right, there were going to be a lot of envoys to the U.N. dropping over in mid-speech with surprised looks on their faces pretty soon, and a lot of election campaigns that were going to be cut short by funerals.

"Among the early symptoms of inhalation of AP1 are a wooden-

ness of speech, a marked increase of rapid eye movement, a decrease in physical manifestations of emotional affect, nausea, rapid heart rate, profuse sweating, and incontinence." When he said *that*, he seemed to notice for the first time that his pants were wet. But if it worried him, it didn't show in his face, and his tone was as emotionless as ever.

It worried me. It worried everybody in the room. It started to sink in. What he was saying was that lying had become lethal. The kind of world that was going to create boggled the mind. It didn't matter if the Union of Lunatic Scientists released AP1 in the subways or not; as long as people believed they might, lying was going to go way down. It was going to be an interesting world, to say the least. And the population problem was going to come under control. We knew it even before he said it, but he said it anyway.

"You have all, of course, been exposed to the aerosol."

I began to have real second thoughts about the use of AP1 now that my own life was in danger.

"You can see why we felt it necessary to detain you here today. And why, of course, we have told you so many painful truths. Essentially, where there are no lies, there are no secrets, so the intelligence agencies along with a good number of other professions are as good as out of business. You are free to go. But one last cautionary note for those who think they can evade the truth by simply not answering: silence is also a lie."

It made me wish I were a divorce lawyer. They were going to clean up once everybody believed AP1 could be anywhere. It gave me some real qualms about my own relationship. We all went out of that room wondering what the world was going to be like without lies and sure of only one thing, it was going to be totally different. For one thing, it was going to cut crime way down. All the police would have to do was pull you over because your taillight was busted and ask you if you had committed any felonies, and if you lied, you became your own executioner. It meant most of the laws were going to have to be changed, and relationships, and the whole social fabric of the world.

It wasn't until recently that I started to be bothered by why they'd sent out that nondescript spokesman. I thought it was just because he sounded like he was telling the truth, *but he had all the symptoms that he was lying*, the lack of emotions, the wooden speech, the incontinence. Nobody seemed to pick up on that, maybe because we



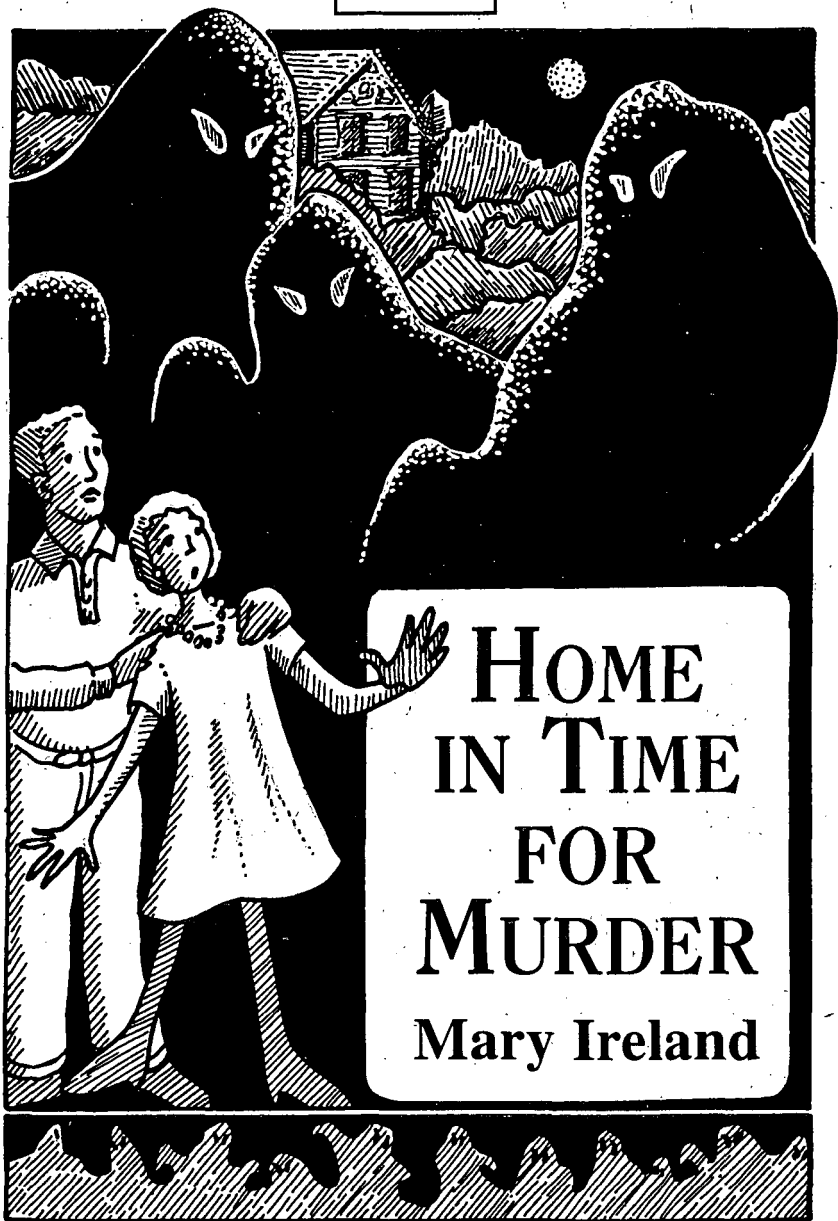
were too worried about our own lies to worry about who was lying to us.

But lately I've been thinking how unlikely it is that, even with a couple of years' preparation, the Union for Scientific Truth could have spread so much AP1 in so many countries. Maybe there *isn't* any such thing as AP1. If anything, maybe there's just a virus that makes you lose control of your bladder. But if you *think* it's because you're lying, you'd never know if you were wrong. Everybody lies every day, even now, when people think it can kill them. And the fact that it doesn't kill them immediately won't stop them from believing it will kill them eventually.

Considering how hard it is to stop lying, even for people uninvolved in the law and government, it's a wonder we aren't all dead. But the fatalities aren't nearly as many as I'd thought there would be. Some people have died, even a lot of people; if you *believe* you're going to die, you *do*. Even some public figures are still telling semilies and not dropping over dead. But most people are changing their lives. It's funny that science has made people do what religion couldn't make them do with a similar threat.

There's only one really dark side: suppose there really *is* an API *but they haven't really released it*. What if the spokesguy was lying. What if there is no Union for Scientific Truth out there at all, and the intelligence agencies are the only ones who know it. In other words, they'd be the only ones who could lie with impunity. Now, *that's scary!*

FICTION



HOME IN TIME FOR MURDER

Mary Ireland

“Are you in the market for a single- or a multiple-murder house?” he asked.

I hesitated.

“Brick, stucco, wood frame? Shooting, stabbing, poisoning? I have a lovely three bedroom axe murder I can show you, ma’am. Spacious. Low maintenance.” He ran skeletal fingers over a balding scalp.

“I really haven’t decided yet, Mr. uh—” I scanned the name plate on his desk “—Mr. Marley.”

“Well, you came to the right place, little lady. Spectre Associates is the biggest real estate agency of our kind. We specialize, of course, in properties where homicides have occurred. But when business gets slow, we’ll pick up a suicide or even a suspicious death, provided the architecture is sound and the story’s interesting.”

“Really?” I murmured.

“Yes, ma’am. We guarantee that our homes have the kind of ambience that our customers are looking for. ‘Fit the crime scene to the client,’ that’s our motto. I have never had a dissatisfied customer yet.” Marley waved at a wall covered with framed pictures of happy clients hovering near their new houses.

“Those properties are nice, but just wait till you see these.” He fiddled with a slide projector. A colored photo flashed on the screen featuring a stately grey stone mansion whose circular driveway was lined with manicured shrubbery. A full moon hung over a mansard roof.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he purred. “Belonged to a doctor who dissected his wife and then drowned himself in the swimming pool. Do you swim?”

“No.”

“Too bad. It’s Olympic size. You can see the edge of it just to the left. See it?”

“Yes.” Like I really gave a damn. “But could I view some of your other properties?”

“Sure, but just remember places like this one don’t stay on the market very long.”

A new slide clicked into place. Black clouds brooded over a house that could have been in *Gone with the Wind*.

“Ah, one of my favorites. Lovely. A triple murder on Christmas Eve. The story made all the papers. A psychiatrist’s son took a shotgun to his parents because he didn’t get a BMW for Christmas.

Then he shot his kid sister for the hell of it. Kids!" He shook his head. "I shot that one."

"You what?"

"I shot this picture." A Cape Cod house with brown and white clapboards had appeared on the screen.

"Rat poison," he said softly.

"Rat poison," I repeated stupidly.

"A lawyer lived there. One night his wife whipped up a chocolate cheesecake with a graham cracker and rat poison crust. The cops caught her running away with the gardener."

The magic-lantern show was getting old, I decided. Besides, there was something scurrying in a dark corner of the office. It kept—something brushed against me. "What the hell was that?" I screamed.

"Oh, one of those damn strays, I suppose," Marley shrugged. "We try to keep them out, keep telling them that we don't have any place for them. But they just slither back in again. Hope you're not hurt, ma'am."

"No, I'm not hurt. But I am anxious to get settled. I've been up in the air long enough." And the truth be told, I was getting weary of balding Marley—the wizened little gnome was trying too hard—and whatever the thing was that was whimpering in the darkness.

I slid a sheet of paper across the desk. "These are addresses of places I'm particularly interested in."

"Hmm. A most unusual procedure. I don't believe any of my clients has done anything like this before. Still, let's see what you have here." He studied the list and then stood up abruptly. "Some of these houses have been vacant for quite awhile. I'll have to go into the other office to check the files. Just make yourself comfortable."

Comfortable I was not. The office was dank. The critter in the corner was making swishing noises. "Spooky," I whispered to myself. I hadn't used the word spooky since Girl Scout camp.

Suddenly Marley materialized beside me. I jumped six inches off the chair.

"Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to scare you," he said humbly.

"Oh, it's not your fault. I've just been on edge recently. The move and all. I do so want to find a place right away."

"Of course you do. Many of my clients feel the same way, especially the first-timers. Now," he went on briskly, "we do have a file on all the locations you asked for. But these houses are rather small. Will you be the only one in residence?"

I nodded vigorously. I longed for solitude and time to think about what had happened to my life.

"As a licensed real estate agent, I am required to inform you that the crimes committed in these houses were of local interest only."

My temper flashed. "I suppose if you are local these places are interesting," I snapped.

"Ah yes, well, of course. Here's a picture of the house on Elm Street that you inquired about." Marley handed me a black and white snapshot of a simple white frame house with a gabled roof, shadowed by towering trees and neatly boxed inside a picket fence.

"Oops. Sorry. That one is already occupied, I see."

How could he tell from looking at an old photograph, I wondered.

"Besides, it's just one of the unsolved cases. Husband and wife were asphyxiated and their only child disappeared the day they died. Happened years ago. She'd probably be about your age today."

"Umm." I examined the photo carefully. The third picket from the gate was still crooked, I noticed. Odd that no one had repaired the fence in all these years.

"The other two places aren't far. Shall we slip out for a look?"

A harvest moon hung huge and yellow in the October sky. A wisp of cloud skidded across its face as Marley and I made the short trip to Carroll Street.

"This one is in pretty good shape," Marley observed.

As I gazed at the two story, red brick colonial with its four white pillars and six perfectly aligned, perfectly dark windows, Marley began, "Curious story goes with that one. A young couple lived there. About five, maybe six years back the husband fell down the basement stairs and broke his neck. The wife said that she'd been stripping the wax off the kitchen floor and he must have got some wet wax on his shoes. Made it real slick on the stairs, you see. Cops were kinda suspicious, but they let her go. Accidental death, they said."

Not stripping the floor, I corrected him mentally. Waxing. Waxing the hallway that led to the basement stairs. Buffing until the wax was smooth as glass on the bilious green linoleum that I loathed. Telling Charlie about a leaking pipe in the cellar. Pushing Charlie until—

"Oh dear," Marley interrupted my reverie. "This one won't do for you. Not at all. So sorry."

"Why not?"

"Look, over by the garage. See the doghouse?"

"Yes. So what?"

"You want a dog around? Always sniffing and growling and barking. When they sense you, their hackles rise, and they go all stiff-legged. Do you want that?" He turned abruptly.

I recalled being told that dogs would be dangerous to me now. Too bad. I had liked animals.

The moon was directly overhead by the time we arrived at the old yellow house with its gingerbread trim. The porch, I noticed, had been painted recently.

"Well, I'm not sure about this one," Marley said. "It's small, and anyhow it's only a suicide."

Suicide? Is that what they thought? Hadn't they seen the bruises?

"—husband's .22 revolver and shot herself in the head. She left a note and everything. Friends said she'd seemed depressed lately. Coroner ruled that she'd killed herself."

"When?" I gasped.

"Huh?"

"I said, when did this happen?"

"Lessee. Today's Friday. Must have been a week ago today. Yup," he agreed with himself.

A week. So that's how long it had been. I had wondered about that.

We entered the house silently. "You look around down here while I check around upstairs, okay?"

I nodded. I drifted into the living room. Darkness is kind to indifferent housekeepers like me. But enough light shone from the street lamps for me to see that the ashes in the fireplace had been swept away and the mantel cleared of bric-a-brac. The air was redolent of furniture polish. New throw cushions flanked the arms of the antique sofa that I had paid too much for and Jack had carted home in a borrowed pickup truck.

I glided into the kitchen. The sink was so white it hurt. The old copper teakettle on the stove had been burnished to a high sheen. Could anyone be living in a place this clean? I opened the lid of the garbage pail. It was empty except for a faint odor of disinfectant.

The dining room was as spotless as the rest of the house. Six chairs stood like sentries guarding the mahogany table. Moonbeams played on the glass doors of the china cabinet. I had loved that dining room furniture, the only mementos of my marriage to Charlie and the big brick house on Carroll Street.

In the gloom I knelt to inspect the dining room carpet. There was a faded, rusty stain by the french doors, the doors that I had tried

desperately to reach, clawed for, couldn't grasp. Instinctively I touched my temple. Head wounds bled a lot, I recalled. Someone had worked hard scrubbing at that stain.

Somehow I couldn't put this immaculate house and Jack into the same picture. Jack's idea of housekeeping was to toss his underwear at the laundry hamper. He might rinse out a cup, but scrub, dust, polish? Never.

Perhaps he'd hired a cleaning service. Or maybe he had sub-let the place furnished and moved somewhere else. It would be just like that bastard to move out now.

There was an easy way to find out. I flew up the stairs and into the bedroom. I flung open the closet door. Jack's clothes were lined up as precisely as a West Point drill team. He had bought some new shirts, I noticed. Hanging next to them were three dresses, two skirts, and several blouses.

I jerked a dress from its hanger. It was red, pure silk, and size six. I hadn't worn a size six since I was fourteen years old.

Suddenly, with cold and terrible clarity, I understood. About two months ago Jack had told me that he was working on a special project for his company. He started staying late at the office several nights a week. Then there were all those business trips that always seemed to fall on weekends. We began to quarrel. Jack found fault with everything—my cooking, my clothes, my weight. We bickered constantly until that last screaming fight, his demands for a divorce, the scramble for the french doors, the shot that rang out, the searing pain. Remembered sorrow welled up within me into a long, muffled groan.

"You're real new at this, aren't you, kiddo?"

"Damn it, Marley! I wish you'd quit sneaking up on me like that."

"Hold your horses. I can help you out. You have some talent, but you gotta work on your technique." Marley let out a moan that started at low C-flat, increased in pitch until it pulsated around F-sharp, then faded to a raspy whisper. He was very, very good.

"Didn't they teach you basic moaning during orientation?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Don't remember. It's all kind of a blur."

"I'll give you a little refresher," he offered. "Come on up to the attic. You can practice. I gotta split pretty quick."

It suddenly occurred to me that Marley's crisp syntax had deteriorated since we had left his office. I liked him better this way. As we floated up to the attic together, I told him about the red dress.

Dust lay thick as frosting on cardboard boxes overflowing with

long-forgotten books and clothes. Cobwebs hung like Spanish moss in the windows. Marley rummaged through the drawer of an old chest. He picked up a three-wheeled roller skate and sent it clattering across the bare wooden floor. "Imagine what that would sound like from downstairs?" he grinned. "Here." He handed me a coffee can half filled with nails, nuts, and bolts. "Give her a shake."

Tiny sparks flew as metal rattled against metal, but my heart wasn't in it. "Marley, what was that thing in the office?"

"Poltergeist. Pesky creatures. We always refer them to Casper's agency, but they don't like him. He's too friendly, they say." Marley tapped the chimney with a broken pool cue and smiled as a hollow thud echoed through the house.

Marley moved deeper into the attic. "Ah, a feather duster!" he exulted. "You know what to do with this, don't you?" I nodded. Intuition told me that a feather brushing against a sleeping face in the middle of the night would evoke unimaginable terror.

For the first time that night I felt relaxed as I watched Marley whirling around the attic like a dervish, hunting for the tools of my new trade.

"Hey, look! A bicycle chain. A little hackneyed, but when you get bored you can drag it across the floor like this."

"Okay, Marley, I'm sold. Do I sign a lease or what?"

"No, that's not necessary. I'll just put my realtor's mark here on the window." He touched his spectral hand to a windowpane. A handprint traced in green light formed on the glass. So that was how he had known the house on Elm Street was occupied—the house where I had turned on the gas jets while my parents lay sleeping and then had fled through a gap in the picket fence.

I inspected the eerie handprint that glowed on the dormer window. "Hey, that's neat," I exclaimed. "Speaking of neat, what am I going to do if that silk-skirted, size six neat-freak who is living with my husband decides to clean the attic?"

Marley was staring out the window as the first streaks of dawn lit the sky. "Don't worry, kiddo. Against you, those two don't have a ghost of a chance." He rolled himself into a ball of blue-white light and vanished.

Alone at last, I curled up on a rafter and surveyed my new accommodations. I felt curiously at home, here among the discards of my past life.

I had plenty of time—an eternity of time. And as the years passed, the size six would spread and sag. Jack, with a little help

from me, would grow restive once again. He had murdered once, and the first murder, I can attest, is the hardest. Or perhaps Size Six would understand Jack better than I had and kill him first. Either way, Jack would pay for what he did to me. I only had to wait. Waiting would not be hard in this cluttered, homey place.

It was good to be home again. Home in time for murder.

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An English Collection

Erich Obermayr



In Paris, in 1890, gentlemen did not make unannounced social calls, so when Paul Aichele heard the sharp rapping of a gentleman's walking stick, he guessed his services as a private investigator were about to be engaged. He set his cigarette in the ashtray, put down his book, and went to the door.

The visitor was M. Jules Labatut, a passing acquaintance known to Aichele from the Chat Noir. Aichele and Mrs. Poll, the Englishwoman who was his part-time housekeeper and companion in the world of the *café artistique*, had shared a table with him on three or four occasions.

Labatut was nothing if not pleasant company. He came from high society but was never aloof or snobbish. He was a master at putting everyone around him at ease no matter what the circumstances. His family owned Compagnie Labatut, a huge brickworks in Belleville. They had made their fortune during the middle decade of the century by supplying brick for reconstructing those sections of Paris that Baron Haussmann demolished as he remade the city in its present modern image.

Aichele once told Mrs. Poll that Labatut's demeanor was the product of a life devoid of the slightest hint of anxiety. There

was no such life, she replied, and Aichele had to agree in theory. But he did propose that M. Labatut's most pressing "anxiety" would be picking a café for the evening, or deciding which pretty chanteuse to take home.

Aichele relieved Labatut of his heavy fur coat and walking stick and deposited them in the foyer. He offered brandy, by the fireside, to cut the chill of the February afternoon.

Whatever was on Labatut's mind waited while he swirled the flame-colored liquid to the rim of the snifter, then drew in its aroma through his nostrils with a languorous inhalation. He waited a few seconds, smiled, and said, "One of the finer things in life, don't you agree?"

"I have always thought so," Aichele said.

"Aichele, do you remember a skit performed at the Chat Noir last summer, the one put on by Baudel's models? It was every bit a farce. A gentleman's mistress finds out quite by accident that she bears an amazing resemblance to the man's wife, and with the right makeup and wardrobe does in fact begin passing herself off as the good woman. Of course there is nothing the poor fellow can do about it, since the mistress threatens to tell the whole world about

their affair if he makes so much as a peep of protest."

"I do remember. I saw it one night in August. I thought it was quite hilarious," Aichele said.

"Were you surprised at the reaction?"

"Reaction? It was an amateur production, and received as such."

"I mean from *L'Univers*."

"Oh, that," Aichele said. "Something about it certainly touched a nerve with . . . what was his name?"

"Boas de Jouvenal."

"Right. He certainly roused the guardians of the public morals with his little article."

"Did you understand why?" Labatut said.

"I frankly did not pay that much attention," Aichele answered. "But I do recall that a mistress who does not know her place, even a make-believe mistress in an amateur production, was evil incarnate to M. Boas de Jouvenal."

Labatut nodded and took another sip of brandy. "The idea that a mistress could usurp a wife's place, and the husband be powerless to do anything about it, is not amusing to certain figures in high society. It strikes rather close to home, if I do say so. A mistress who does not know her place will be assaulted mercilessly, from all directions,

and will eventually pay dearly. You see, she is privy to a gentleman's innermost desires and peccadilloes and is often confided in rather carelessly. So she has to be controlled, and anyone who rejects this control must be made an example of. Imagine, then, a mistress who has not simply exploited some physiognomic similarity but one who is accused of murdering her gentleman's wife."

"Someone you know?" Aichele said, now guessing the point of Labatut's visit.

"You are most perspicacious; monsieur. A dear lady friend of mine . . . well, much more than a friend, but that is a story for another day. Her name is Jeanine Régnier. She is an indescribable delicacy, if I may say so. She is lovely, young . . ." Labatut raised his eyebrows slightly, the gesture taking the place of any further description. "She has been involved with a gentleman—though I use that term loosely—who sells books. He thinks of himself as something of a magnate, since he owns all of three bookstalls, one on the Quai St.-Michel. Who knows where the others are."

"Quai St.-Michel? I've probably seen it," Aichele said. The quay, with its row of bookstalls along the river wall, was only a few blocks from Aichele's apartment.



"Their relationship does not concern me," Labatut continued. "Girls like Jeanine defy possession. They live for two things only—the present, and themselves. Their passion and affection go no deeper than the immediate moment, and to expect more is to be a fool. If nothing else, it spoils the moment, if you know what I mean."

Labatut paused, amused by his own comment. Then he became quite serious.

"As we speak, Jeanine is locked up at St. Lazare, and has been for three days. She is accused of murdering the wife of the 'gentleman' in question. The accusation is absurd, of course. She is a sweet, sentimental creature who cannot stomach smashing even the smallest insect. I am here to enlist your help in demonstrating her innocence, and I am prepared to pay five thousand francs cash, in advance, to engage your services. If that is not enough, please tell me, because money is no object."

These were good words to a retired detective whose pension was half the normal amount, due to the peculiar circumstances surrounding his separation from the police force. Aichele concealed a momentary smile behind the rim of his brandy glass. Labatut had already laid a neat stack of bank-

notes on the table alongside Aichele's chair.

"Five thousand francs will be quite enough," Aichele said. "Now, what are the facts as you know them?"

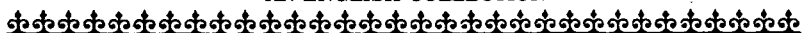
"The 'gentleman' is a M. Tollmann. Jeanine met him at one of his bookstalls. She was searching for some sentimental picturebook, and he happened to have a copy. They talked. One thing led to another. They have been seeing each other twice a week for six months or so."

"You are well informed, M. Labatut, if I do say so."

Labatut nodded but dismissed the comment with a slight wave of his left hand. "Jeanine Régnier and I have spent many pleasant hours together, and we still do meet on occasion. You know how it is with these girls, Aichele. A distinguished gentleman inevitably becomes more of a confidant, or even a father figure, than a paramour. And frankly, the girl likes to talk."

"Why do they suspect her?"

Labatut helped himself to another glass of brandy and swallowed a mouthful without fanfare. "Tollmann sent a message to Jeanine to meet him at his apartment on Tuesday at lunchtime. She went there and, no one answering her knock, did just as his note instructed



and let herself in the unlocked door. She discovered a scene of utter carnage in the library and was standing there, in a complete state of shock, when Tollmann himself arrived. He accused her of perpetrating the deed, and unluckily for made-moiselle, the police concurred."

"On what grounds?"

"Pure circumstance. She was standing in a pool of blood, and there was a bloody knife in arm's reach on the library table. The next delivery boy who happened along would have found himself in the exact same situation. Tollmann told the police about his relationship with Jeanine, and that was enough for them. As I said, a woman in her position, against whom there is even the flimsiest evidence, will be made an example of."

"You're saying Tollmann arranged a rendezvous with his mistress in his own apartment, while his wife was home?" Aichele said.

"That is what Jeanine told me. She does not read, so the *pneumatiques* she receives must be read to her by the messengers. A mistake in the hour, or even the day, could have easily been made."

Aichele crushed out his cigarette and lit another from his silver pocket case. He offered one to Labatut, who declined.

"What exactly are her feelings for Tollmann?" Aichele said.

"She has never said, at least not in so many words. But the suggestion that she would kill his wife in order to have him to herself is preposterous." Labatut thought for a moment, then continued talking, gesturing toward Aichele with a slightly upraised finger. "Tollmann fancies himself some sort of intellectual, with his bookstalls and all, and no girl I've ever known, especially an illiterate, finds that appealing." He lowered his hand. "The man even collects Shakespeare in the original English, though I doubt seriously that he reads it."

"What about any promises Tollmann might have made to her? Some permanent arrangement between the two of them? A divorce, possibly?"

"She mentioned nothing of the sort." Labatut suddenly smiled, as if he had just remembered something fascinating. "There is one point I did not mention. They have not found Mme. Labatut's body."

An immediate, almost imperceptible brightening of Aichele's expression was the only indication of the rush of enthusiasm he felt enlivening his mind. What was a very humdrum domestic murder case, made interesting only by the five thousand

francs, had suddenly acquired a dimension of genuine intrigue.

It was dusk. Aichele walked slowly across the Pont St.-Michel toward the Cité. The air was damp and chilly, but it was too late in the year to hope for one of the picturesque Parisian snowfalls. And each day's extra minutes of light went unnoticed under the omnipresent, unforgiving overcast.

He approached the Préfecture de Police and stopped for a moment at the front steps, as he often did, to clear the memories from his head and focus on the business at hand. Almost all the offices were closed and dark. There was light in one, however, and Aichele knew exactly which lamp provided it because the office had once been his.

Inspector Leroux, an ex-colleague, now occupied Aichele's old office. Leroux's eyes took on a predictable, stricken look whenever he realized Aichele had become involved in one of his cases. Put simply, Aichele was the superior detective, and he never missed an opportunity to demonstrate that to both Leroux and the Préfecture.

This time, however, when Leroux looked up to see Aichele standing in the doorway, he stared calmly, his expression revealing nothing. His only sign of

nervousness was letting a fountain pen drop too nonchalantly from his hand onto the blotter at the edge of the desk. A few black dots appeared on the papers he had been working on.

"Bon soir, Lèroux," Aichele said. "By any chance are you working on the Tollmann case?"

"I am."

"Ah. That is good luck for me. Have you found the body yet?"

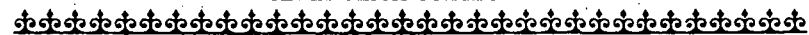
"We may never find it," Leroux answered, without hesitation. One thing he had learned was never to be surprised by the uncannily thorough knowledge Aichele somehow had of cases under investigation by the Préfecture.

"You seem unconcerned, inspector. Won't it be difficult to obtain a murder conviction without a corpse?"

"We have a suspect, a weapon, a motive, and enough blood for three murders." A carving knife was on the desk in front of Leroux. He had been writing its description for his report. Aichele picked the knife up. Leroux eyed him closely but did not protest.

The handle was completely covered with dried blood, and dark blotches marked the steel of the blade, which had been thinned by many sharpenings. "You have a theory, Leroux?" Aichele said.

Leroux leaned back in his



chair and said nothing for a moment. It was, however, the gesture of a confident man who was taking his time. "The crime was basically a robbery, perpetrated by Mlle. Régnier and unknown accomplices. She had access to the apartment, and doubtless some knowledge of where the valuables were kept. They either did not expect Mme. Tollmann to be home, or she offered unexpected resistance. One way or another, she suffered the consequences."

"You know for a fact that Mlle. Régnier was a regular visitor to the apartment? That she had a key? That she knew anything about the place?"

Leroux shrugged complacently. "We caught her there."

"And the body?"

"Mme. Tollmann was apparently murdered in the library, and then her body was dragged through the house and out the rear entry. Very likely it was dumped in the river, and since three days have passed, I expect it to float to the surface any time now."

"But why would Mlle. Régnier remain behind?"

"Why do you assume she had a choice? Her accomplices might have deserted her by design, or they might have run off in panic when M. Tollmann arrived."

"Have you offered leniency if

she informs on her accomplices?"

"At this point, no. Not that it wouldn't be a good idea to present the more fragile member of a conspiracy with that sort of proposal, but the investigation has yet to run its course. Perhaps she will come to us, *n'est-ce pas?* Or perhaps the voyeurs at the Place de la Roquette will be offered the prettiest neck they've seen in quite some time."

Leroux frowned in mock disappointment when Aichele showed no reaction to his remark. Leroux was never one to shrink from cruelty, Aichele remembered, whether he expressed it himself or came across it in the day to day performance of his duty.

"I would like to examine the scene of the crime," Aichele said, "if there is anything left to see."

"Be my guest," Leroux said. "Nothing has been disturbed."

This was unusual. Even in the most brutal murders, it was possible to collect the evidence within twenty-four hours, or two days at most. Then the scene was returned to its owners.

"The investigation is incomplete," Leroux reiterated, answering Aichele's questioning look. "We have allowed M. Tollmann access to the apartment, but it remains under constant guard. The address is 14 Rue Campagne Première."



"Thank you, Leroux."

"It's nothing. By the way, I'm guessing you are involved on behalf of Mlle. Régnier."

"You've guessed correctly."

"I know your services are not inexpensive, so is she rich as well as beautiful?"

Aichele left the question unanswered.

Rue Campagne Première was an unusual street. It was very old and narrow, but unlike the tortuously crooked streets of old Paris, it ran straight as an arrow from Boulevard du Montparnasse to Boulevard Raspail, ending opposite the Cimetière Montparnasse. The Tollmann apartment was in an ordinary building whose slight shabbiness was accentuated by the dim streetlights. It once had pretensions. The front balconies had been buried under extravagant lattices of wrought iron; however, the material had apparently been salvaged from another site, as its busy curlicues clashed with the simpler lines of the building's basic design.

Aichele inquired with the concierge and was directed to a ground floor apartment at the rear of the building. A gendarme stood guard at the door, and three others were stationed inside. Aichele explained that Leroux had given him permission to examine the scene, and this

was not challenged. He was, after all, not an unfamiliar figure to the rank and file Paris policeman.

The library was a small, windowless withdrawing room. The wall opposite the door was covered from floor to ceiling with books. Half was taken up by small bookcases, stacked one on top of the other, and half by a massive, glass-fronted cabinet that sat upon a large cupboard, two feet high and at least as deep, with two ornately carved wooden doors. Piles of books resembling stout, square columns lined the other walls. A table and chair occupied the remaining open space in the center of the room.

Aichele turned up the single flickering lamp and by its light saw that what at first appeared to be complete chaos was actually a well-ordered library. Novels, poetry, drama, science, mathematics, and other topics were all shelved together, subdivided by author. He bent down and opened the cupboard doors, and found it filled with stacks of books by English authors. Shakespeare, Dickens, and Jane Austen were among the names he recognized, and it was clear from the numbered, matching volumes that these were sets of collected works.

There was a closet in the wall opposite the cupboard. Its sin-



gle door was blocked by four short stacks of medical textbooks. They were massive books, and Aichele slid them away just enough to open the door, and to see inside with at least some light. Heaps of clothes hung from pegs along one wall, and the floor was covered with a jumble of hatboxes. There were more stacks of books just inside the door. They reached to his waist, and he unconsciously leaned his hands on them as he bent over to peer among the hatboxes. Straightening, he took the top book from one of the stacks and looked at it. It was Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, volume three of his complete works.

He closed the closet door and turned his attention to the center of the room. The table was small and square. A straight-backed chair stood nearby, against a wall. There was a large bloodstain, black in the lamplight, on the floor between them. The surface of the table was covered with dried smears and spatters, which shone with a faint glossiness in the lamplight. A discontinuous trail of dark smears on the floor led out into the hallway. Aichele followed it down the hall, through the kitchen, and into the rear vestibule. It ended at the outer door, where stains reached part-way up the bottom panel.

He opened the door and stood on the back step, looking out into the gloom of the unlit courtyard. There was a kerosene lamp on a shelf in the vestibule. He lit it and held it high. Its low light revealed a large, neglected square that served several adjacent apartment buildings. It was overgrown and dotted with piles of garbage and refuse. A network of pathways led through the weeds from the broken-down gate of the service entrance to the rear doorway of each building and the back steps of the ground floor apartments.

Aichele extinguished the lamp and went back inside the apartment. He realized he had been under the watchful eye of one of the gendarmes the whole time.

"Would it be possible for me to speak with M. Tollmann?" Aichele said.

"Be my guest," the gendarme answered casually.

"He is not a prisoner, is he?"

"Oh no. He is a principal in the case, and he is not to leave without telling us, but he can come and go as he chooses."

The gendarme led Aichele to Tollmann's bedroom door, watched as Aichele knocked, then took up a position along the wall, within earshot.

"*Entrez*," an irritated voice said from inside.

"M. Tollmann, allow me to in-



roduce myself. I am Paul Aichele, a private investigator."

Tollmann was a tall, lanky man with a full beard badly in need of trimming that extended well down his shirtfront. He was standing alongside his bed, wearing a black and white checked robe. A book and a pair of reading glasses lay on the blankets.

"A private investigator?" Tollmann said. His eyes were tired and bloodshot.

"I am here to discover the truth regarding your wife's death." Aichele had seen Tollmann before, at one of the book-stalls along the quay, but he could not exactly place him.

"Who told you she was dead?" Tollmann snapped.

"There must always be hope, but you know as well as I that the situation argues against it."

Tollmann stared wearily at Aichele. Three days of virtual house arrest had taken their toll.

"Why did you invite Jeanine Régnier here?"

Tollmann turned away in disgust, then said, "Why is it that although my wife has vanished the police do not expend the slightest effort in finding her? Why am I expected to sleep here in this bed night after night, while on the other side of that wall the most hideous scene remains untouched, and will ap-

parently remain that way forever? Do you have any idea what it is like for me to simply walk into my own kitchen for a glass of water?"

"The police have their reasons," Aichele said, realizing too late that he should have been more sympathetic. "But did you in fact invite Mlle. Régnier to this apartment?"

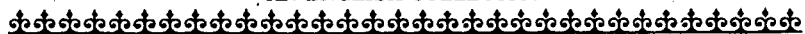
"Why would I? So she could meet my wife?"

"Mlle. Régnier told the police you sent her a message instructing her to meet you at this apartment at noon on Tuesday, and to let herself in if no one was here."

Tollmann brushed nervously at his nose with the tip of his thumb. "I know nothing about any message."

"Do you come home regularly for lunch?"

The question seemed funny to Tollmann, and obviously unworthy of an answer. "Sometimes I do," he finally said. "Now, M. Aichele, whoever you are, I am tired. I am tired of being treated like a prisoner while the police already have my wife's killer locked up. I am tired of having them—and now you—lurking around my apartment looking or waiting for God knows what. If you would be so kind, monsieur, get out of my house."



Aichele left without another word.

There was a special section in St. Lazare for women accused but not yet convicted of crimes. Visits were strictly limited in the rest of the prison, but down this particular corridor the rules were loosened considerably. All it took was a small gratuity for the guards to turn a blind eye to an after-hours call by a husband or lover. Aichele slipped a generous handful of coins to the jailer in charge and was led to Mlle. Régnier, accompanied by salacious murmurs from each cell they passed along the way.

Aichele had expected Mlle. Régnier to be beautiful and very young—in fact not more than a girl. And she was indeed lovely and petite and would undoubtedly have been described as girlish if seen from a distance. Her face was round and delicately proportioned, there were freckles on her cheeks, and her wide blue eyes at first presented nothing but innocence. But the impression of purity was incomplete. Her expression went too quickly from charmed surprise to deep and almost cynical reserve, as if she found any display of emotion contemptible.

Mlle. Régnier shared her cell with a coarse, bruised crone who sat unmoving on her cot, her back against the cracked and

peeling wall. She stared vacantly ahead, lost in her own world, and did not look up when the guard swung the barred door open, then left Aichele alone to introduce himself.

Mlle. Régnier was pleased, but not unduly impressed, when Aichele explained that M. Labatut had hired him on her behalf.

"He tells me you are innocent of the charge against you," Aichele said. "So far I have seen nothing to make me think otherwise. But you are a lovely and intelligent woman, mademoiselle, and I admit I would be hard pressed to know it if you ever lied to me."

"Why would I do that, monsieur?" she answered, a suddenly charming lilt to her voice.

Aichele smiled at her. "How long have you been M. Tollmann's mistress?"

"I was never his mistress."

Aichele sighed, and Mlle. Régnier glared at him.

"I was told you had some sort of relationship with M. Tollmann. How would you describe this relationship, and how long has it been going on?"

"M. Tollmann is a friend . . ."

"Do you sleep with him?"

Aichele interrupted.

"Yes," she said curtly.

"And he gives you money?"

"Never. Only presents."



"What did he have to say about his wife?"

"We never discussed our personal lives."

"I was told you like to talk."

"That would depend on who I am with."

"You met M. Tollmann at his bookstall?"

"One of them. He owns three." Mlle. Régnier said this with a touch of pride.

"I thought you never discussed anything personal."

"He told me what he did for a living. It meant nothing. Three bookstalls? Six bookstalls? What difference would it make?"

"It would make a difference in the quality of the 'presents' you received."

"Perhaps," she answered.

"Did you ever discuss books or literature?"

"Is that meant as an insult, monsieur? I do not read."

"Of course not. I was just wondering if he talked to you about his business, about the kinds of books he bought and sold."

She looked out through the bars of her cell for a moment. "M. Tollmann and I spent four hours a week together at most. He did not waste those hours discussing the book business."

Aichele opened his cigarette case and offered one to Mlle. Régnier. She took it from his hand, and as she did so, her cellmate suddenly rose and stood in

front of Aichele, staring at him. He shook several cigarettes loose and gave them to her. She retreated to her cot, where she produced a match and lit one of the cigarettes.

"Why did you go to Tollmann's apartment?"

"He invited me."

"He sent you a message, by the *pneumatique*, correct?"

"Yes."

"What exactly did it say?"

Mlle. Régnier closed her eyes briefly, in concentration. "It said, 'My dear Jeanine, Do me the pleasure of meeting me at my apartment, 14 Rue Campaigne Première, twelve o'clock sharp, today. If I am not there when you arrive, I will be soon, so let yourself in. The door will be unlocked. Yours truly, Thomas.'"

"The messenger read it to you?"

"Yes. I told you, I do not read."

"But your memory is excellent."

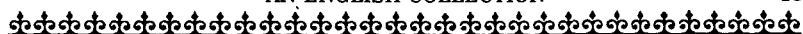
"It has to be."

"You had never met before at his apartment, had you?"

"No."

"Did you find this invitation odd?"

"Of course. But I assumed M. Tollmann would not be such an idiot as to invite me there if his wife were not gone—far away and for a long time."



"And that was not the case."

"I wouldn't know. I never laid eyes on Mme. Tollmann, either that day or any other day."

"What time did you get to the apartment?"

"A few minutes after twelve."

"What happened?"

"I knocked. No one answered, so I opened the door and let myself in, just as I had been told. I spoke out once or twice, but no one answered. I waited just inside the door for a few minutes, then I wandered through the living room, just looking about. I saw something ahead on the floor in the hallway, like spilled liquid. When I looked at it closely I thought it might be blood, but I did not see how that could be possible. It led to the library. I followed it. I don't know why. I just walked along, looking at it. When I saw the horrible pool on the floor in the library, I knew what it was. I almost screamed; but I remembered where I was. I, of all people, could not be discovered in M. Tollmann's apartment. I just stood there waiting, I don't know for how long. I kept telling myself M. Tollmann would be there soon, he would explain it all, and everything would be fine."

"He arrived shortly afterwards?"

"I think so. I am not sure, but it could not have been more than a few minutes. He came in

calling out, 'Eugénie,' and then he saw me, and the blood. He demanded to know what I was doing there. The knife was on the table. I had not noticed, but he saw it. He said, 'What in God's name have you done?' It was all so unbelievable. I could not speak."

"So he was surprised to see you there," Aichele said.

Mlle. Régnier paused, her upper lip curled into a sneer. "He acted surprised."

"You told him about the message?"

"I showed it to him. I always keep such things. He looked at it, then he swore, and ripped it up."

"Had he sent it?"

"He did not say, one way or the other."

"Then what happened?"

"He rushed back and forth from me to the other rooms in the apartment, shouting for his wife. I begged him to explain what was happening, but he would not speak to me. Finally I tried to leave, but he grabbed me by the arms and held me. I still have the bruises. Then he said he was going for the police, and I was to wait there. But when he got to the door, he changed his mind. He told me to go the Boulevard du Montparnasse and get the police. He had hold of my arms again. It hurt, and it made me cry. He said if I

did not return directly with the police he would kill me. I have never been so frightened in my life, M. Aichele. I found the gendarmes and brought them back, and no sooner had I stepped through the door than M. Tollmann accused me of murdering his wife. The police put me in the living room, and after a time an inspector came and asked me some questions, and then told me I was under arrest for murder."

"Did you tell the police about the message?"

"No. They did not ask, and I was not thinking clearly at all."

"Did you see what happened to it after M. Tollmann ripped it up?"

"No. I don't remember seeing it when I returned with the police, but I had barely set foot in the library when they took me away."

"The knife was still there?"

"Yes. I did see the knife. And there was one other thing . . ."

"What?"

"A book had been lying on the table, near the knife. I think it was new because it was on a piece of wrapping paper that had been unfolded around it. The book and the paper were gone when I came back."

"What was the name of the book?"

"I don't know." Mlle. Régnier blushed slightly.

"What did it look like?"

"Oh, it was very beautiful, and large. It was purple-dyed leather, very shiny, with gold lettering and decorations on the front. The edges of the pages were gold, too."

Aichele sat silently, absorbed in thought. "An expensive book," he mumbled, thinking out loud.

"Excuse me?" Mlle. Régnier inquired.

He smiled at her. "Nothing. I will be on my way, mademoiselle. Sleep well."

It was almost midnight when Aichele emerged from the front gate of St. Lazare. He was very satisfied with the progress he had made, and he tried to put the best face on the fact that he now had to return to the Tollmann apartment to remedy an almost inexcusable oversight.

There were two major train stations in the vicinity of St. Lazare, so it was only minutes until he successfully hailed a fiacre on its way up Boulevard de Magenta to the Gare du Nord, ordered the driver to reverse direction, and climbed inside.

Resigned to his fate, Aichele sat back to enjoy the ride through the heart of Paris. The Boulevard de Sébastopol, which led south to the Seine, was at that time of night the purview of solitary figures bundled up

against the cold, some walking purposefully toward their destinations, others drifting, lonely somehow in the greatest city in the world.

There was more activity on the Cité as handfuls of gendarmes and detectives, whose work knew no hourly limits, crossed the Boulevard du Palais between the Préfecture and the Palais de Justice, sometimes escorting sullen prisoners. Boulevard St.-Michel, on the Left Bank, was also deserted for the most part, with the exception of small, raucous gangs of revelers—bohemians, students, or both, making their way from one café to the next. The cafés themselves often gave no hint, from their closed, windowless exteriors, of the energy contained within. Of course some were veritable beacons of bright light and celebration, but others were marked by nothing more than a faded, unlit wooden sign hanging over a plank door.

The fact that he passed literally within a stone's throw of his St.-Séverin apartment and its warm bed was not lost on Aichele. In fact, it spoiled the remainder of the ride.

At the Tollmann apartment he knocked softly on the door. "My apologies for troubling you at this hour," he said to the sleepy gendarme. "May I spend

just a moment in M. Tollmann's library?"

"Suit yourself," the gendarme said, and yawned.

Aichele walked quickly to the glass-fronted bookcase, the gendarme trailing groggily behind. One glance, even before he opened the door, was all it took.

"You are slipping, old man," he said to himself. At eye level, standing out like a mismatched brick in a row of small, identically bound volumes consisting of the collected works of George Sand, was a book bound in dyed purple leather, with gold edging and gold-leaf decorations. It was, according to the title, the autobiography of Louis XVI. Aichele pried it gently away from its neighbors, first on one side, then the other, squinting closely at the space between the books. Then, satisfied, he stepped back and closed the glass door.

Aichele was surprisingly well rested when he awoke early the next morning. There was no time to lose. He dressed and walked quickly to Boulevard St.-Michel. There were no cabs in sight, so he boarded the first tram that passed, crossed the Seine and changed lines at the Place du Châtelet, and then continued out the Rue de Rivoli to the Place de la Madeleine.

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Hurrying into the Café Du-rand, he ordered a tray of croissants, butter, jelly, and a pot of coffee. He directed that it be delivered to Mrs. Poll, whose apartment was just around the corner on Boulevard Malesherbes. Before it was dispatched, however, he composed a short note, asking her, immediately upon finishing her breakfast, to make certain inquiries at two bookstores, both located in the Passage des Panoramas and both noted for their stocks of rare antiquarian books.

He gulped down the *café noir* he had ordered for himself and walked the several blocks to the post office on the Place de l'Opéra. There, he sent two messages via the *pneumatique*. One was to Leroux at the Préfecture de Police, and it stated simply that the inspector should meet him at the Tollmann apartment at ten o'clock, and that he should make sure M. Tollmann would also be present. Leroux would be perturbed, but he knew well enough to carry out Aichele's instructions to the letter.

The second was to Labatut, informing him that at ten o'clock that morning, at the Tollmann apartment, 14 Rue Campagne Première, his five thousand franc investment would mature.

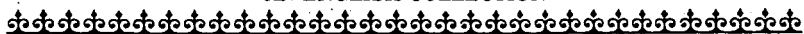
His chores complete, Aichele

spent the next hour or so enjoying breakfast and a morning newspaper in a small café on Boulevard des Italiens. When he arrived at the Tollmann apartment a few minutes after ten, he was happy to see that, with the unsurprising exception of Mrs. Poll, he was the last of the party to arrive.

"Good morning, everyone," he said. "I trust you've introduced yourselves. If not, allow me to present M. Labatut, an acquaintance who, for reasons of his own, is very concerned with this case."

Labatut was fresh and alert, his cheeks reddened from the brisk morning air. A slight odor of gentleman's cologne accompanied him. Tollmann was the exact opposite. His clothes were wrinkled and stale smelling, there were dark circles under his bloodshot eyes, and his body slouched with weariness, as if some insistent weight bore down upon it. Leroux seemed oddly bemused, like he knew the conclusion of the little drama about to be played out.

"To the library," Aichele said, and led the way down the hall without waiting to see who would follow. Everyone did, and once Leroux, Tollmann, Labatut, and two of the gendarmes had arranged themselves, the small room was quite crowded.



"Inspector Leroux," Aichele began. "It is time to end your torture of M. Tollmann."

Leroux folded his arms in front of him, an uncharacteristic grin covering his face. "But ending his torture would only begin his agony."

Tollmann looked back and forth in bewilderment between Leroux and Aichele.

"The blood was the clue, *n'est-ce pas?*" Leroux said.

Aichele remained silent, which produced a disconcerted frown on the inspector's face. It vanished, however, when he started to talk. He did not simply address Aichele, but lectured the whole group. "The trail of blood leading from this room to the back door appears, at first glance, to show that a body—that of Mme. Tollmann—was dragged through the apartment, to be disposed of at some unknown location. At least that is what we were meant to think. In reality, the body never left the apartment."

"What are you saying?" Tollmann stammered.

Leroux gave him a condescending smile. "If you will allow me, monsieur. The first inconsistency is at the back door. Blood was smeared on the interior side of the door, well up on the bottom panel. This meant the body was, at one time, leaned against the door. Why

would anyone intending to take a body out through a doorway do that? Wouldn't they only have to move it again in order to open the door? The answer is there was never any intention at all of taking the body out the door. But the blood trail itself is more telling. It consists almost wholly of long smears on the floor, presumably following the direction in which the body was dragged. If we look closely, we also notice there are a few tiny droplets of blood overlying the smears. These could not have been deposited when the body was dragged across the floor, but only later, when the body was carried back through the apartment from the back vestibule to its current place of repose. How am I doing, Aichele?"

"No argument so far, inspector."

"Are you telling me my wife's body is in this apartment?" Tollmann demanded frantically.

"Are you familiar with Russian literature, monsieur?" Leroux responded.

Tollmann stared, dumbfounded, and trembling.

"Do you know a book by Dostoyevsky, called *Crime and Punishment*? Of course you do, you're a bookseller. I haven't read it myself, but I know the story. And I know you murdered your wife and have hidden her

body somewhere in this apartment."

Tollmann stood, swaying for a moment as if on the verge of collapsing on the floor. Leroux slid the straight-backed chair under him just in time. His arms flopped forward onto the table, unmindful of the flecks of blood sprinkled across its surface.

Leroux continued. "As for your attempt to incriminate Mlle. Régnier, well, who could blame you? How could we not arrest the mistress found at the scene of the wife's murder? I considered the possibility that the two of you were in it together, but that simply is not supported by the evidence. Also, the feminine partner in such cases always breaks down, and Mlle. Régnier has been in St. Lazare four days now, knowing a full confession is her only chance for leniency, and she has not even blinked. As for her doing it alone, well, I don't think she could have stabbed your wife and then dragged her body back and forth through the apartment without getting at least a speck of blood on herself. That leaves you, monsieur."

Tollmann swallowed hard and fought back tears. "I swear to God, inspector. I did not kill my wife, and I do not know where her body is."

"You killed your wife and hid her body, which you planned to

permanently dispose of later, at your leisure."

"No."

"Then please explain why you invited Mlle. Régnier to this apartment, on Tuesday noon, knowing full well your wife was here?"

"I did no such thing."

"Come now. You lured made-moiselle here so that she, and her fictitious accomplices, would be blamed for your crime."

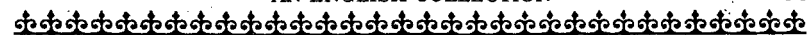
"I tell you I did no such thing."

"But M. Tollmann, we found the message you sent her, torn in half, right here under this table."

"That note was utterly preposterous," Tollmann said. "I do not know how she could ever think I sent it. It infuriated me. I ripped it up and threw it away like the rubbish it was."

"Or, as I prefer to think, you made a careless mistake in the heat of the moment, and it is going to cost you dearly. Now, if not for the season our noses would have told us where the body was days ago, and I dare say that might yet occur. Or I could have my men dismantle the apartment piece by piece, but I think it is obvious how much more persuasive it would be if you yourself led us to it."

Tollmann could do nothing but shake his head in disbelief.



Then, in a barely audible voice, he began to speak. "If, as you say, Mlle. Régnier did not kill my wife, then I know who did. Another man was here in the apartment."

"Oho," Leroux said, looking at the others in the room with amusement.

"I was to meet a man here. He was going to sell me a book. A very valuable book. I told Eugénie to let him in if he arrived before I did."

"Interesting," Leroux said, scratching his beard. "At least now, instead of asking us to imagine Mlle. Régnier and her gang of cutthroats, you've narrowed the cast of villains down to one."

Leroux leaned on the table, his hands flat on its polished surface, and his face only inches from Tollmann's. "It takes half an hour by tram to get from Quai St.-Michel to this apartment, less time if you take a cab. Your fellow booksellers along the quay saw you leave at ten o'clock. That is too early for a twelve o'clock appointment, but it would give you plenty of time to do your dirty little deed, and to arrange the proper scenario."

"That's not it at all," Tollmann pleaded. "The man I was to meet instructed me to go first to the Place du Carrousel, and if he did not contact me there, I was to go

to my apartment, where he would meet me at noon."

"Ah," Leroux said, backing away. "Why didn't you say so sooner? You were out on a wild goose chase. That explains everything. Of course you will give us a full description of this fellow, won't you? And if you'll tell us where he lives, we'll have him arrested before lunch."

Tollmann stared at the floor, crushed by Leroux's sarcasm. "I have never seen him."

"What a shame, monsieur."

Silence overtook the room. Finally, Aichele said, "M. Tollmann, had you bought books from this man before?"

"Yes," Tollmann answered.

"Stolen books?"

"I don't know."

"Come now," Aichele said.

Tollmann twitched uncomfortably.

"Did he offer you valuable books at, say, only a small fraction of their real worth?"

"Yes," Tollmann sighed. "He would leave the books at certain locations, on a bench somewhere, on a table at a café. I would pick them up and leave some money concealed nearby, according to his instructions."

Aichele went to the bookcase and withdrew the volume he had examined the night before. He laid it on the table in front of Tollmann. "Is this the book you were to have bought on Tues-

day?"

"Yes. That is how I know the other man was here. He brought it with him."

"You expect us to take your word for that?" Leroux said.

"That will not be necessary, inspector," Aichele said. "First, notice this area on the table which is completely devoid of stains or spatters. It roughly corresponds to the size and shape of the book."

Leroux took the book and placed it in the middle of the spot Aichele referred to. But the book was noticeably smaller.

"What do you say to that, monsieur," Leroux said.

"There was a piece of wrapping paper spread out under it," Aichele countered. "M. Tollmann burned it in the fireplace when Mlle. Régnier was gone looking for the police. That was also when he placed the book on the shelf there, in the middle of his George Sand collection."

Leroux was looking closely at the cover of the book, holding it at an angle to catch any shine or reflection from the small dark dots and smears, which were almost invisible against the dark purple leather. "These spots could be anything," he said.

Aichele removed one of the George Sand volumes that had been adjacent to the larger book. It was bound in white calfskin. He set it on the table, where

everyone could clearly see the reddish smears across the leather. "The blood was still wet when the two books touched."

"That is intriguing, Aichele," Leroux said. A slightly uncertain tone had crept into his voice. "But what have you really proved except that M. Tollmann was dealing in stolen property and then tried to conceal that fact? He is about to go on trial for his life, after all, and a good prosecutor might argue he killed his wife because she threatened to expose him. Furthermore, although you have demonstrated that the book was on this table when Mme. Tollmann was murdered, we have no way of knowing when it first got here. It could have been Tuesday noon as M. Tollmann would like us to believe. Then again, it could have been Monday noon, or a week ago Tuesday."

"I would concede your point, inspector," Aichele said, "if I couldn't account for the whereabouts of this book up until . . . let us say, sometime Monday afternoon."

Leroux was puzzled. "And between Monday afternoon and Tuesday noon?"

Aichele turned to Labatut. "Perhaps you would enlighten the inspector, monsieur."

Labatut stared at Aichele in





disbelief. "What are you talking about, Aichele?"

"Or more interestingly, would you tell us how you knew M. Tollmann's library included collections of English authors, in the original English."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Labatut answered earnestly. "Mlle. Régnier told me. I thought I explained all that."

"She did nothing of the sort. Mlle. Régnier and M. Tollmann spent only a few hours a week together. Suffice it to say they did not spend that time talking, much less discussing English literature. The only reason you knew of Tollmann's penchant for English authors was that you had to transfer a good portion of his collection from the cabinet to the closet in order to hide Mme. Tollmann's body."

Tollmann sprang at the cabinet, throwing open the doors and flinging books out right and left. "Eugénie," he exclaimed, and fell back with a sob.

Mme. Tollmann's body was concealed in the rear of the cabinet, walled off by stacks of books, her knees under her chin, and her arms in front of her face. Enough time had passed for rigor mortis to loosen its grip, and she fell limply out onto the floor once she had been pulled from the cabinet. The terrible gash across her throat left

no doubt as to the origin of the bloodstains. The faint odor of decay filled the room.

Tollmann scrambled to his feet and moved to attack Labatut with his bare hands. Aichele easily held him off. "Why?" Tollmann demanded. "Why did you do this?"

"You are as tawdry an actor as you are an intellectual, Tollmann," Labatut said scornfully. "It is just as Leroux said—you killed your wife and hid the body, obviously planning to dispose of it once the police had finished their investigation. Fortunately, the inspector was one step ahead of you."

"But you knew where the body was," Tollmann hissed.

Labatut smiled. "No, I did not. I may have mentioned your collection to M. Aichele, but I only knew of it because Mlle. Régnier described it to me. She may not recall doing so, but I would gladly allow the courts to decide which of us to believe."

A woman's voice called out from the hallway, in an English accent. "Inspector Aichele. Are you there?"

"In the library, Mrs. Poll," Aichele answered.

There was not room enough for Mrs. Poll to come any farther than the doorway. Behind her, looking in from the hallway, was a diminutive man, with thick

spectacles, dressed in a smartly tailored blue suit.

"Inspector Aichele, this is M. Girault of Morgand's bookshop." Mrs. Poll seldom referred to Aichele by his former title except in the presence of Inspector Leroux. Then she did so without exception.

Aichele picked the large purple volume up from the table, handed it to Mrs. Poll, and motioned for her to pass it on to M. Girault, who now stood beside her. "Is this book familiar to you?" Aichele asked.

M. Girault looked the book over briefly. "Why yes. It is a copy of the so-called autobiography of Louis XVI. It actually consists of diary entries arranged chronologically, but they are really quite comprehensive. They cover perhaps two-thirds of the king's life."

"Is it a valuable book?"

"Quite. Why just the . . ."

"Was this copy in your shop?" Aichele interrupted.

M. Girault took a moment to examine the inside of the back cover. "Yes. Here is our insignia—this tiny stamp on the back cover."

"Messieurs," Tollmann said in a loud but trembling voice. "If it is your purpose to convict me of dealing in stolen books, I confess. But I am no murderer."

"Stolen?" said M. Girault. "If you mean this book, that's im-

possible. It was purchased six months ago from the Marquis de Lévigé when he liquidated his uncle's library. We have his receipt. We then sold the book this last Monday afternoon to this gentleman right here, as a matter of fact." He bowed politely toward Labatut.

"He's lying," Labatut snapped.

M. Girault recoiled in surprise, his feelings genuinely hurt.

Leroux frowned, looking first at Labatut, then back to Girault. "This man bought the book Monday afternoon?"

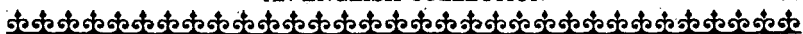
"Yes. That is what I said, wasn't it?"

"Are there other clerks in the shop who can also identify him?"

"Certainly. We all talked about it after he left. Valuable books are never bought on a whim, but this one obviously was. The gentleman hardly cared what book he bought, just so it was an expensive one."

Labatut stood stock-still, his hands clenched into fists.

"Between Monday afternoon and late Tuesday morning," Aichele said, "this book was in your possession, M. Labatut. You used it to identify yourself to Mme. Tollmann as the man her husband was expecting. And when she unwrapped the book here on the table, you killed her."



"M. Labatut, you are under arrest," Leroux announced, his voice a strained mixture of authority and exasperation. He glanced briefly at Aichele, then signaled the gendarmes to take Labatut from the room. He resisted, but with one man at each arm his struggle quickly became moot.

At the same time M. Girault first saw Mme. Tollmann's body on the floor, her face covered by a jacket taken from the closet, and he fainted dead away.

Two days later Aichele and Mrs. Poll shared breakfast at Café Durand. It would not have been Aichele's first choice, but it was Mrs. Poll's favorite.

"I must say, Aichele, M. Labatut never struck me as a man whose downfall would be impatience. If he had left you out of it, and let Leroux's strategy run its course, he would have gotten away with murder."

"True. But let's not overlook the value of the strategy itself."

"Oh?"

"Leroux thought he was letting Tollmann's conscience do the dirty work, as in the Russian novel. And it was a brilliant move. Why not let the murderer lead you to the corpse?"

"Except that Tollmann was the wrong man," Mrs. Poll pointed out.

"A minor detail," Aichele said, wryly. "The important thing was

that the delay caused Labatut to think Mlle. Régnier was really going to be blamed for the murder, despite the patently transparent scene he had created in the apartment. And getting her head cut off would have spoiled everything."

"So he came to you thinking you would correctly interpret the evidence and point the finger at M. Tollmann?"

"Exactly."

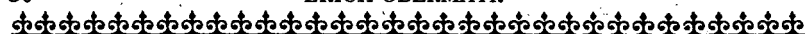
"But why Tollmann, of all people? How could a man like Labatut be threatened by a petty bookseller from the quays?"

"*C'est là le diable*, Mrs. Poll."

"There's the rub?"

"As Shakespeare would say. Tollmann was not the target, even though Labatut would have sent him to the guillotine. Imagine. Mlle. Régnier would have gotten the fright of her life thinking, as poor Tollmann climbed the scaffold in Place de la Roquette, 'There but for the grace of God . . .' But eventually, with some timely hints from Labatut, she would realize God had nothing to do with it. The day would come when she would understand what Labatut had done, in all its sinister complexity."

"You mean he wanted more than the everlasting gratitude she would have felt toward him for hiring you and saving her life?"



"Much more. He wanted her to understand that he had tricked the state into executing an innocent man, and that he had casually dangled her over that same precipice. And who was to stop him from doing it again, any time he chose?"

"What a horrid thought."

"Mlle. Régnier's gratitude

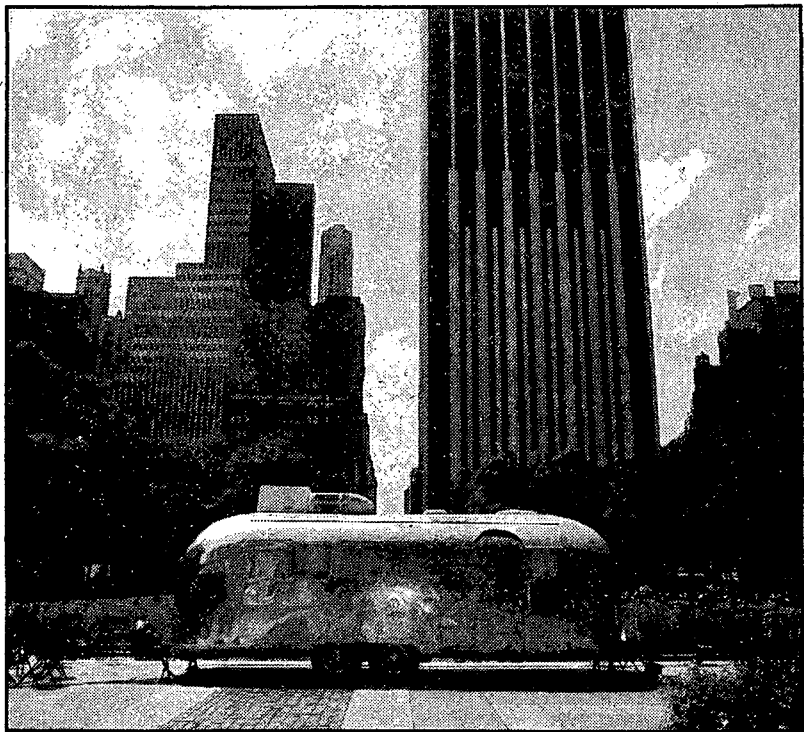
was meaningless to Labatut. He wanted her completely under his power."

"Luckily he was a rich man, and could afford to hire you when he thought it was slipping away."

"Luckily indeed," Aichele answered, and poured two more glasses of chablis.

*For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.*

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.*

Wrong canyons. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION



# TO HUNT LIKE THE HAWK

David K. Harford

K&O

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I  
*The Hawk*

I watched the hawk circling, hunting, circling slowly, dipping low, then rising high, gliding on the lofty air currents.

The small window through which I was watching the bird was set high up the wall—for security reasons, I imagined—so I couldn't actually see the wide open field I knew it was soaring over, scanning to pick out the slightest movement: a rabbit's hop, the flip of a squirrel's tail, some other small rodent making a frantic scramble for safety. It was a big red-tailed hawk on the hunt, undoubtedly hungry.

Behind me, more as background noise than anything else, came the low drone of Feldman's and Longstreet's voices, Feldman's more subdued than I'd ever heard it.

The hawk continued its slow, calculated, almost leisurely circling flight, sharp eyes never leaving the field, all instincts tuned for seeking, ever seeking, any kind of movement.

Feldman's voice rose from almost a whisper to a near whine. "Why's everyone asking me about that brooch, Longstreet? The police wanted to know what I knew about it, and now you ask me, too. I'll tell you what I told them. I first saw it last Thursday night. Sarah and I

were in the back seat of her car. It was a warm night, the crickets were chirping, the fog was rolling in off Kinzua Creek. You get the picture? I unbuttoned her blouse, and there was that brooch staring at me."

I heard Longstreet push back in his chair. "What did it look like?" He'd had been talking with Feldman through the heavy mesh wire for the last half hour while I stood off to the side listening, watching the hawk.

"It hung on a gold chain around her neck. Fairly good-sized. Pretty piece of jewelry, too. Shaped like an eagle's head with a pair of eagle eyes looking back at me. Indian jewelry it was."

"Did she say where she got it?"

"No. We were into other things. The cops asked me *that*, too."

"From what I've heard, Sahara wasn't wearing it when the police found her the next day on that logging road, beaten so bad you could hardly recognize her and then shot. Nor did they find the brooch when they searched her house."

"I don't know about that. I don't know anything about her death. All I know is, I'm in jail because of a fight. But the police—they want to know about a bunch of things other than my fight. They showed me a broken gold chain and asked if it was



like the one Sarah was wearing when I saw the brooch around her neck. They played me a cassette recording out of Sarah's answering machine and asked if I recognized a certain voice. I didn't." Feldman raised his eyes from the scraped and scabbed knuckles of his thick fingers. He looked Longstreet right in the eye. "I didn't have anything to do with Sarah's death, Longstreet." His gaze never wavered, his eyes never dropped. "Most folks wouldn't believe it, but Sarah was lonely, so lonely. I know all about loneliness. I think I could have loved her, believe it or not. And quit calling her Sahara."

The recently deceased woman in question, dumped in a crumpled heap along a logging road, was Sarah Dulles, a young—much too young—but not-so-pretty widow from Johnsonburg, a papermill town down the road from Westline about fifteen miles. Most of us called her Sahara because on the one hand she was flat and uninteresting but on the other hand she could be very hot. Feldman apparently found out just how hot she could get, as a lot of other men before him had found out.

"It was like she was trying to fill a void in her life, like it was a bottomless pit and she was always trying to fill it, with the comfort of as many men as she

could. Of course, when she met me, I told her to get rid of her other boyfriends—"

Longstreet cut Feldman off. "I'm not interested in your night moves. Let me tell you about that brooch; then I want you to tell me what was on that tape recording." Longstreet paused a moment to gather his thoughts. "The brooch actually belonged to Marcia Colby. It was stolen, along with everything else, out of the Colbys' camp. And the theft there was just another in the string of camp break-ins that have been going on all spring and summer around here. Mr. Bartlett's camp was cleaned out, too. Need I go on? Chuck Colby, as you already know, is as dead as Sahara is. Sarah, I mean. That's why the state police are interested in what you know about it. That brooch is linked to two murders: Chuck Colby's and now Sarah's."

The hawk I was watching banked in the high blue cloudless sky, and the October sun glistened off the shiny brown feathers of its back. From what I could see of them, the Allegheny mountains rising on all sides of the county jail where Longstreet and I had come to talk with Feldman were deeply involved in bright autumnal colors: the reds, oranges, yellows of oaks and cherries, some green

from the hemlocks, the reddish-purples from maples. It made me imagine a sopping wet rainbow wrung out and hung to dry, dripping and bleeding an array of glossy colors all over our mountains.

"Well, I didn't kill her," Feldman insisted, nearly pleading. He tugged at the collar on his blue county jail coveralls.

"I don't think anyone believes you did. You're in here on assault charges, that's all. What the hell did you have to hit the guy so hard for?"

"He said Sarah had peanut butter legs."

I chuckled to myself, hoping Feldman wouldn't see me. *Creamy smooth and easy to spread.* Old joke, but very appropriate.

"So you took his head off?"

"Hey, man, she's my girl."

Longstreet adjusted his chair. "She was everyone's girl, Feldman," he said.

The hawk flapped its wings a couple of times and tightened its circle. It looked as if its patience was about to run out and it might try another spot.

"Here's how it went down with you," Longstreet said to Feldman, his friend, our friend. "According to what I've heard, there was an off-duty state policeman in the bar in Bradford when your fight broke out that evening. He overheard you men-

tion that brooch being around Sarah's neck to the guy you eventually decked. Of course, by this time the police knew all about that brooch, that it came out of Marcia Colby's camp, and they also had just found Sarah's body with that broken gold chain still around her neck. So they put two and two together, and suddenly they've got lots of questions for you."

I turned to study Feldman's reaction and saw his mouth was turned down at the corners in a frown. "What the hell am I mixed up in?" he asked. "Get me out of this cage. I hate this place." He scanned the cement block walls of the county jail.

"Now tell me about the tape recording," Longstreet said.

Feldman thought a moment. "It came out of Sarah's answering machine. Hell, even some of my messages to her were on there. But the cops had me listen to one guy who said, 'About that little present I gave you a few weeks ago. I need it back. But I've got something worth even more to give you. Meet me as soon as you can where we usually meet. We'll just swap—' And then Sarah picked up and I heard her say, 'I just got in from my one o'clock class. I'll be ready in a few secs.' And then she shut the machine off."

"And you didn't recognize the male voice?"

"Nope. Probably one of her ex-boyfriends."

Sometimes Feldman could be real naive.

"What did she mean by her 'one o'clock class'?" Longstreet asked.

"She was taking a course at the University of Pittsburgh campus in Bradford. It met at one o'clock every Friday."

"And it was early Friday evening that those hunters came across Sarah's body."

"By that time I was in Bradford drinking."

"Where else were you that day? Were you drinking anywhere else before you went to Bradford?"

"I started out drinking at the inn in Westline about noon, when they opened. I was there until about five."

"Who was at the inn when you were there?" Longstreet asked. "I want you to tell me exactly what you did with who. Were you drinking *with* someone?"

"Skull. I was drinking with Skull until he left. Then he came back again. Maybe an hour later."

"Who else?"

"There were some leaf-peepers, and I think a businessman was there. I'm not sure if he was a businessman or not. He was dressed like one: suit, tie. Herbicide was tending bar."

"While drinking at the inn,

did you tell anyone about the brooch you saw hanging around Sarah's neck the night before, like you did later in Bradford? You brag to Skull about scoring with her?"

"I may have told him. I don't know. If I did, it was just in passing." Feldman wrinkled his forehead, trying to remember. "Yeah," he said suddenly, "I told him. I remember now 'cause Skull laughed and said, 'Welcome to the club. What took you so long to join?' That frosted me he'd say that about her. I don't think *he* was ever with her."

Really, really naive, I thought.

"And I could have mentioned the brooch. Yeah, probably did. In fact, I know I did."

"And Skull left later?"

"He went out to pop a deer."

"You see the dead deer when he came back?"

"No. But I know he did because when he came back, like I say about an hour later, and we had a few more, he had fresh blood on his sleeves from when he gutted it out."

"What time was this?"

"Sometime after two. I'm not sure. Maybe later."

I turned away from watching the hawk. "Was the businessman staying at the inn? Did he have a room upstairs?" I asked him.

"I don't know. If he did, he probably registered as Mr.

Smith. You don't realize how many Mr. Smiths there are in this world until you hang around a hotel somewhere. The reason I say that is I've seen him there before, off and on. With a different girl each time. But I think he *was* staying at the inn."

"And you knew none of the leaf-peepers?" Longstreet asked.

"Nah. Just your usual horde of city folks driving out to the country to look at the foliage. Half-dozen or so, most with kids, in the barroom eating sandwiches."

"With Herbicide tending bar. Did he seem to know Mr. Smith?"

Herbicide was Herbert A. Snyder. "The chicks call me Herb or Snide," he told us the day he was hired to bartend part time. And that first day, mostly because he was nervous and unsure, was about the only time he was halfway personable. It didn't take any of us local Westliners long to dislike him, to tag him with Herbicide, which fitted him in more ways than one because he was something of an irritant. He had an overly inflated opinion of himself, was showy and pretentious, and was lazy behind the bar, and worse, he seemed to view the rest of us as a bunch of backwoods hicks he could do without. So he fitted in

with us about as well as a glove might fit on your foot.

"Herbicide talked with the guy, sure. With the leaf-peepers, too. It's his job. He gets bigger tips that way. Not long after Skull left to pop that deer, Herbicide went out and called his girlfriend from the phone booth outside the inn. I remember that. She lives in Rew and it's long distance and the inn doesn't like long distance calls made on their phones, he said. One of the waitresses watched the bar for him."

Set back deep in the woods the way our town was, many of our calls, even to towns nearby, were long distance.

"You see him make the call? You see him out there the whole time?" Longstreet wanted to know.

"I got up and walked around, thinking about what I was feeling. For Sarah, I mean. I looked out the window and saw him on the phone at the phone booth outside, yes. He said later he couldn't get ahold of her. It rang and rang and rang, he said, but apparently his girl wasn't home. He kept trying, but no good. That seemed to put a bee in his bonnet."

"So, you mentioned seeing that brooch to Skull—and I'm assuming you were talking in your usual loud voice—and Skull suddenly gets up and

leaves for a while. Herbicide goes out to use the phone. It couldn't have been Herbicide you heard on Sarah's answering machine tape, could it?" Longstreet asked.

"I don't believe it was."

I turned back to watch the hawk.

"You know, though," Feldman said, "that businessman must have left, too, sometime. I wasn't paying much attention to him. He and Herbicide had been talking most of the time. But after Skull came back from getting his deer and Herbicide was back from the phone and three of us were doing shots that Herbicide bought for us—well, actually the inn bought them for us because although Herbicide said they were on him I never saw him dig in his wallet and actually pay for the drinks—I noticed the businessman again, and he'd changed clothes sometime during the last hour or so. So he must have left at some point, and he must have been staying at the inn. Or he was using a camp nearby."

"And all this happened after two; between two and three, would you say, after you mentioned the brooch to Skull?" Longstreet asked.

Feldman nodded yes.

Our time was up for visiting Feldman. Just as Longstreet was rising to leave, Feldman

asked, "Why are you interested in all this, Longstreet?"

Without hesitation and with a hint of anger in his voice, he said, "Because of Mr. Bartlett's camp, that's why."

I gave the hawk one last glance. Some small animal in the field below the bird must have committed a fatal error and moved. Perhaps frightened by the hawk's shadow. I watched the hawk hover, its wings flapping slowly, holding it in position as if suspended momentarily in the sky by a piece of wire. I knew it was sighting in on whatever had moved below. Then the hawk kind of tucked its wings in tight and dropped like a dive bomber straight for the ground. A few seconds later it rose into my view again gripping what looked like a small rabbit in its talons.

When we pulled into Longstreet's driveway, Mary was sitting on the porch step, her arms folded around her knees. She raised one hand, and I couldn't see her very well but it looked like she either flipped Longstreet the universal sign of contempt or she made a fist at him. It made little difference really which gesture she used because when your wife does either one,

it's usually not an indication good things are about to happen.

"Ah, hell, that's right." Longstreet pounded the steering wheel with his palm as we got out of the cab of his truck. "I forgot. I forgot," he said to his wife. "Hit me, beat me, make me write bad checks."

Mary lowered her head onto her knees, and I could see she was smiling but trying not to show it. It wasn't often she got Longstreet moving on the defensive, apologizing.

"I took care of them," she said. "I was about an hour in the bedroom with the TV guy." She pretended to be straightening her mussed hair. "What a connection we made."

As Longstreet glanced at an area of exterior wall near the porch of his house, he explained to me, "We're going to build a firewood chute here so I can toss wood into the house without opening and closing the door during the winter carrying wood in. We're going to build a small tool compartment above it, too, so we don't have to keep trudging through the snow to the toolshed for the snow shovel, broom, or whatever. I'll only need to go in there to get venison out of the freezer."

"And I won't have to go in the toolshed at all with all those creepy crawly things in there,"

Mary added. "That's the real reason."

Longstreet continued. "Problem was, the TV, telephone, and electric lines had to be moved to another part of the house so I can build it. I wanted to be here when they moved the lines. Forgot they were all coming today." He looked down the length of his house. "They get everything?" he asked his wife.

She nodded. "I had a splitter put on the cable and a line run up the house, so we now have a TV hookup in our bedroom upstairs. But now we'll have to buy another TV. The telephone company installed a new box. And the electric company moved their drop line, too. How's Feldman doing?"

"He hates being where he is, but it's good for him. Maybe he'll learn to control his temper." Longstreet reached into the cooler on the porch and brought out three beers. He opened Mary's and handed it to her. I took one, and Longstreet took a long swig out of his. He sat down next to his wife and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"What's this about Mr. Bartlett's camp?" I asked him.

Longstreet scanned the expanse of empty field across the dirt road running alongside his house, took another healthy swig, and said, "Mr. Bartlett paid me a hundred dollars to go

up and check on his camp now and then while he was in Europe. He didn't like leaving it unwatched with all those other camp break-ins going on. Lo and behold, don't they break into his camp and just clean him out? Won't look very good for me when he gets back next week."

"He's not going to blame you. You couldn't be watching it twenty-four hours a day."

"I'm not worried about that. It's—" He stole a glance at his wife:

She said, "Go ahead and tell him."

He thought a moment. "Okay. Here goes. I'm thinking of starting up a camp security business," Longstreet said to me. "Charge these guys some bucks to check on their camps while they're gone. I might even get into small repairs for a fee, and I can supply most of them with firewood. It would be a great side business, something to do in the winter when I'm not logging. I could get paid for what I'm already doing for fun—riding around the back roads of this area soaking up a little nature."

"And Mr. Bartlett is—" I started to say, but Longstreet cut me off.

"Is president of the Tri-County Camp Owners Association. He has the names, address, camp locations of over a thou-

sand camp owners in the three-county area. He's my open door to this organization. How's it going to look if people know I was responsible for watching Bartlett's camp and it got broken into? So that's why I'm interested in all this. I want to find Mr. Bartlett's furniture before he gets back."

"How are you going to do that?" I asked.

"First we're going to go see Marcia Colby. I want to find out about their break-in and about that brooch that was stolen along with everything else in their camp. The brooch seems to be a key to all this. People who have it are turning up dead. I also want to find out exactly who that businessman was that Feldman mentioned. Maybe Herbicide knows if he was staying at the inn. And somehow I'd like to verify that Skull actually shot a deer that day. Was that deer blood Feldman saw or Sarah Dulles's blood on Skull's sleeve?"

## II

### *The Hunt*

We drove up to Chapel Fork Road towards Colby's camp first. Depending on who owned them, the numerous camps in the area, in and around the Allegheny National Forest, were



either in the final stages of disrepair and nearly falling down, were well maintained, or were being renovated. Some were brand-new log houses as big as the Taj Mahal, with large bay windows for viewing the mountain scenery. Because hunting season was approaching, activity of some sort was going on around most of the camps we passed, and many had cars parked out front with out-of-state plates, or stickers advertising Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, or Philly auto dealers.

In both fall and spring, the police report in the *Bradford Era* was filled with numerous reports of camp break-ins. With the sharp increase in such crime in our area, local folks had come to realize that we weren't as far removed from city life these days as we liked to think. Like a painful cancer spreading, eating up the wholesome flesh in our area, crime was slowly creeping in on us, too.

Marcia Colby's camp was one of those Taj Mahal jobs set back off the dirt road overlooking a long, wide meadow that sloped down the south side of the mountain. Although Marcia knew us—well, she knew us by name anyway; she and her husband often ate dinner and drank at the Westline Inn when they were up from the Williamsport area where they lived, which

was nearly every weekend—she squinted up at us as we stood in the doorway, apparently not recognizing us at first. To me it looked like she was trying to see through a kind of darkness or fog in and around her. Lost without her husband, standing alone in her bare camp, the small, dark-haired woman reminded me of a bewildered puppy cringing in the middle of a busy freeway, things larger than she was whizzing by her.

She pulled the collar of her Woolrich jacket up tight around the pale skin of her neck. I knew she was from Woolrich, Pennsylvania, where that clothing is made—worked for Woolrich, in fact—and I wondered if she wasn't wearing it as a way to keep in touch with herself, like a security blanket, or if she was truly cold. It was hard to imagine how she could be cold. It was nearly eighty degrees out. Probably one of the last warm days we'd have for a while.

She stepped aside, inviting us into the huge, empty house. I half expected to see a chalk outline made by the state police indicating where Charles Colby had been found shot with a .38, but I knew they didn't really outline a body. They could have, though, because the thieves had even ripped up the wall-to-wall carpeting, leaving only bare plywood floors.

"I'd offer you a cup of coffee, but they stole the dishes from my cupboard." Marcia jammed her hands into her coat pockets and hugged herself a bit, pulling the coat tighter around her thin body.

Maybe because we were there and she wasn't alone any more, and had the sounds of friendly human voices to comfort her, she removed the jacket a few moments later and began to explain about the theft.

"As you may know," she said in a squeaky, tight voice, "we came up after work nearly every Friday. Our Sunday rituals were equally predictable. We'd stop at the inn Sundays around two, have lunch, and leave for home. Our predictability. That was our downfall, the police said. Our one mistake that cost Charles his life."

"Because this particular time your husband came up during the week, is that it?" Longstreet asked.

"He unexpectedly got Thursday and Friday off that week, so he said he'd drive up Wednesday night and open the place. I was to come up Friday after work as usual. The police theorize that he must have caught the thieves in the act. They said the tire marks showed the thieves probably had a large truck, and just backed up to the porch and cleaned us out. Had

to be at least two men, possibly a gang. The refrigerator they took weighed a ton, I thought. They took food and everything."

"They sure did clean you out." Longstreet looked toward the bare windows where drapes must have hung at one time. He whistled softly, and it echoed a bit through the empty rooms.

"TV, VCR, rifles, shotguns, furniture, appliances, jewelry, some money, even tools out in the shed. Carpets, too, as you can see. Here. I made copies of this to pass out."

She bent down and opened her purse lying in the middle of the floor, pulled out a couple of sheets of paper with typing on them, and handed one to me and one to Longstreet. "Where I could," she said, "I noted make, model, and serial numbers. Charles was very good about recording things like that. The police have the same list. I've got to get estimates of value for insurance purposes sometime. If you should see any of these items in any house around here, call the state police."

"What about this brooch, Mrs. Colby?" Longstreet asked, pointing at the list. "Shaped like an eagle's head. Was it Indian jewelry?"

"Yes, that," she said softly, and a trace of fond remembrance passed over her face. "Charles bought that for me the

year we built this place." Her thin smile lingered. "He got it at the Indian reservation, the Seneca Indians in Salamanca. I kept it in a jewelry box on my dresser in the bedroom. It was supposed to be one-of-a-kind. It was more a good luck piece than anything else. I guess it wasn't so lucky, after all, was it."

"It hasn't been too lucky for a lot of people," Longstreet commented.

The Senecas, one of the five tribes of the Iroquois Nation, had a reservation in nearby Salamanca, New York. Lately the tribe had seemed overwhelmed with its own problems—inter-tribal conflicts and feuding over things like bingo; Indian sovereignty; the sale of tax-free cigarettes, booze, and gasoline; a proposed casino. It also seemed that when they weren't feuding among themselves over who the reservation was going to be run by and how, they were taking matters to state and federal courts of all levels. "Since the time the white man set foot on America, we've been trying to get the Indian to be just like us. I submit we've finally succeeded," Longstreet remarked after one tribal upheaval had led to gunshots, leaving two dead. "We've gotten them to be greedy, violent, and distrustful, and they've learned the most important thing there is to learn

about being civilized. They've learned to go out and get a lawyer."

While there may have been some truth in Longstreet's sarcasm, I saw it a bit differently. I saw what going on on the reservation as just more black spots in that advancing cancer. But it wasn't unusual for folks from our area to drive to the reservation; maybe not for Indian jewelry, but certainly for tax-free gas and cigarettes.

"You find that brooch and you'll find the persons who killed my husband. And if I'm not mistaken, I believe the police have found someone who knows something about it, someone from down in your town, I think they said," Marcia Colby said, not trying to hold back what sounded like a flood of anger and fear that had been building up, wanting to spill from her.

We left Marcia Colby to deal with her anger, with the emptiness of her house, and with her personal emptiness and headed back towards Westline. But we made one more stop because it was on the way.

Skull was puttering under the hood of an old car in his yard. He'd been trying to get the thing running for months. Without lifting his head from under the hood, he watched me and Long-

street cross his yard towards him.

Skull, Gary Skully really, was a laid-off oilhand. He'd worked Kendall's oilfields for years until Kendall sold all his leases, but Skull didn't get hired by the new owners of the leases. Long ago his unemployment had run out, and the only work he'd found was an odd job here, something there. He was a pretty good mechanic, too. His wife worked at Case Cutlery in Bradford, so there was some money coming in. Skull's only son was married and out of the house, and ordinarily that would have helped someone in Skull's position, not having to pay the expenses of rearing a kid, but Skull felt obliged to help his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson as much as he could. After all, Skull had encouraged his son to work in the oilfields, too, and now his son was also laid off. Such is the strong fiber most folks are made of in this neck of the woods; such is that wholesome flesh around here. But none of it is immune to being attacked by that cancer. I think Longstreet and I both knew that Skull was capable of ripping off a few camps if he was desperate enough.

Skull mopped his balding head with a handkerchief, then used it to wipe oil and grease from his fingers as he emerged

from beneath the car's hood to greet us.

A barrel-chested, stout man he was. His chapped and calloused hands, his broken fingernails, the sunburned skin of his muscular forearms told you immediately that this was no man who'd spent his working years behind a desk inside an air-conditioned office somewhere. He wasn't a guy you'd want mad at you either, especially if he'd been drinking and all common sense had gotten washed away by the booze. Certain people, and Skull was one of them, simply lose all reason when they're drunk, and in a brisk barroom brawl, guys like Skull you definitely don't want turning on you. Drunk, and without wanting to, he could easily kill a man—or a woman, I suppose—and not realize he was doing it. Sober, he was the nicest guy in the world.

"Longstreet, long time no see," Skull said to us. "You here to offer me a job in the woods with you?"

Longstreet was an independent logger who cut tracts of timber in the National Forest, state land, and private lands, whatever he got a bid on. The timber business was enjoying a boom these days, and Longstreet had work he was turning down.

"No." Longstreet jammed his

hands into his jeans pockets. "Sorry, Skull. I got a good crew. You're top on the list, though, like I told you a while back, if someone should drag on me."

If Skull was disappointed, he didn't let us see it. "I can wait. We're all right as long as the old lady keeps working. Hate to put it all on her, but—. The kid told me his wife's pregnant again. Got to talk to that boy, I guess. Kids ain't cheap to bring into this world." Skull squinted up towards the sunset. "I'll be waiting, if something does open. I'll find something. Something'll come along. Always does. Gonna be nice tomorrow," he said, indicating the crimson sunset that had turned the western sky pink.

Longstreet cast a long look across Skull's property towards his house and open garage. I saw him zeroing in on Skull's chest freezer sitting against the back wall of the garage.

"There is one thing you can do if you want," Longstreet told him. "Rent me your freezer. You got room in your freezer?"

"Huh?" Skull grunted.

"I just looked into my freezer this morning, and it ain't working right. It's all built up with ice. I've got it loaded with food. We just bought a side of beef, and we've got venison, turkey. You got space? I'll pay you for the use of it for a few weeks."

"Oh yeah." Skull glanced over toward the garage. "It's empty. In fact, it's not even plugged in. No sense running the electric up, but you're welcome to use it."

I didn't know Longstreet's freezer was busted, and I was about to tell him he'd be welcome to use mine for free, but Longstreet must have known I was about to open my mouth because the minute Skull turned his attention towards his garage, Longstreet gave me a sharp jab in the ribs, telling me to keep my mouth shut. Which, of course, I did.

"I'll give you fifty bucks. Let me get my stuff out of mine and put it in yours. I'll need most of the space in it. I'll defrost mine. It might have just lost some Freon, I don't know. But it's worth it to me not to lose all that beef. You sure you got the room?"

"I got all the room you need, and you got a deal," Skull said. "I'll plug it in. See if it still runs. Lucky for me you come along." Skull laid his hand out, palm up, for the money, and he did it quickly, a bit too quickly. I guessed he might be a little more desperate for money than he wanted us to know.

"I'll bring the money up when I bring the stuff."

"Oh yeah. Sure. Sure, that'll be all right. Sure. No hurry."

He slammed down the hood of

his car. "Could you try to make it this evening? I got to pick up something. It's the grandson's first birthday. I got to get him *something*. I'm all tapped out, Longstreet. You know. Hate to be like this, no money."

For someone like Skull to out and out admit he was broke took a lot of courage. Guys like Skull don't like it known they could be failing, even though it may be written all over them. If it weren't for the pain still in my ribcage telling me Longstreet wasn't really interested in renting Skull's freezer, I'd have given Skull fifty bucks of my own. Skull was good for it. Trustworthiness is another strand of that strong fiber.

But Longstreet must have been thinking in another direction because the only thing he said in the truck on the way back to Westline was, "Skull said he's got lots of room in his freezer; it isn't even running. If he took a deer last week, he sure didn't put it in his freezer, and in this heat he ain't got it hanging anywhere."

The parking lot of the Westline Inn had a few cars in it, and one of them was Smitty's truck.

Smitty sat hunched over the bar, a frosted pint-sized canning jar of draft beer clutched in his large hands. He turned his bearded face our way as we

came through the door. "You see Feldman?" he asked.

Herbicide poured us drafts, and Longstreet told him to give Smitty a beer chip. Longstreet nodded yes to Smitty's question.

"Well, I hope he gets his mess settled soon and gets back here. I'm swamped with work," Smitty said.

Smitty owned a large garage up on Route 219, the main trucking route north and south through the area. He mostly repaired trucks and medium-sized construction equipment; Feldman was his right-hand man. Since Feldman was sitting in limbo down at the county jail, Smitty was trying to carry the load of two men, working a lot of overtime doing it.

We sipped our beers, and then Longstreet caught me completely by surprise when he asked Herbicide, "How's your love life, Herbicide? Got a hot date tonight after you close up?"

"Found me a new chick," the tall, lean bartender said, straightening up from the bar sink where he was washing glasses. "Me and Norton, he's a good friend of mine, you guys don't know him, we're going to double up tonight after I punch out." Reflexively, since the conversation was turned to him—his favorite subject—he ran his fingers lightly through his ash-colored hair, straightening it,

and straightened his shirt and belt. If there'd been a mirror handy, Herbicide would have been talking to us while looking in it. "I'm test driving this new babe now," he said. "She's got a bit more zip than the last three. 'Course she's younger and has all that sexual energy to burn off. Nice equipment, too. Might as well burn it off on me."

"Might as well," Longstreet agreed, but not sincerely.

"You guys might not know it," Herbicide said, "but you get a fast car, some fine threads, add some walking around money, and you talk to them chicks the way they liked to be talked to, telling them things, I mean, not asking them, and them women will stick to you like glue. Women are weak and insecure like that. They like men who've been around a bit. Men who control their lives. Norton and I have found this to be true."

"Is that why you've gone through four women the past few months? Your glue must be drying out." Longstreet said it low enough that only Smitty and I caught the remark.

"Action, money, and worldliness. Yes, sir, that's what they like. Not *this*." Herbicide frowned and passed his arms with one sweeping gesture in front of him as if to take in the bar, us, our secluded town, and our backwoods style of living.

"We'll try to raise our standards," Longstreet said dryly.

"What've you guys got here?" Herbicide went on, as if he actually thought we were interested in his observations. I really didn't understand why Longstreet had gotten him wound up in the first place. "You're back in the woods. You don't know anything but what's here in your little town. There's more out there in the world than trees and guns and hunting and trapping and marrying broads who are apt to turn fat on you."

I could hear sharp anger and frustration rising in Herbicide's voice, as if his tolerance had run out; as if he actually believed image was everything and when that failed him—as it did from time to time (as superficiality often does), leaving him limp as a balloon with all the hot air sucked out of it—Herbicide, who had absolutely no substance to him at all, would sometimes lash out angrily. I've found it's not unusual for shallow people to be driven to anger quicker than others.

I watched Longstreet stiffen and grip the edge of the bar like he wanted to tear a hunk off of it. Or off of Herbicide was more like it. Surprisingly, he was showing good restraint.

But Smitty had less restraint. "We love our women fat or skinny," Smitty said gruffly. "They



keep us warm at night. And you'd better watch your mouth, 'cause, man, you're treading on real thin ice. That's my wife you're talking about."

Smitty shoved back his barstool, got up, and went to the john. Longstreet sauntered into the kitchen to talk with the owner, who was preparing the dinner specials for the night.

I was still wondering why Longstreet would have asked Herbicide about his love life, knowing the bartender as we did, knowing what his answers were going to be. But what surprised me more was that Longstreet hadn't reached across the bar and grabbed Herbicide by the scruff of the neck when he insulted most of our wives and our local women. I glanced back into the kitchen and saw the inn's owner shaking his head sorrowfully at something he and Longstreet were talking about while Longstreet flipped through the inn's employees' time cards near the clock where everyone punches in for work.

He came back a couple of minutes later. Smitty was still in the john.

"Hey, Herbicide, you know a businessman who's been coming up here the last few months, getting a room here for a few days, then leaving again? A short blondhaired guy, I'm told.

Dresses fine, just like you. Is he listed in the book there?"

The room reservation book lay on the counter behind the bar, but Herbicide didn't need to look at it. "You mean Mr. Smith?"

"Yes. But what's his real name?"

"Mr. Smith, Longstreet. Bruce Smith." Herbicide made it sound as though Longstreet had to be the dumbest guy in the world not to know Mr. Bruce Smith, the same businessman Feldman said was in the bar the day Sarah was killed, the businessman who might have heard Feldman mention that brooch and then left for God knows how long or for what reason. "That's his real name. He owns Smith House in Pittsburgh."

"What's Smith House?" Longstreet asked.

"See, that's what I mean about you guys. You don't know anything. Smith House is the biggest auction house west of New York City and east of L.A. Antiques, art. He'll buy up entire estates and sell them. Or do them for a cut. He's a very, very wealthy, worldly man," Herbicide added. "And still young."

"When's he coming back? Did he make a reservation for a room?"

Smitty, heading our way, must have picked up on the con-

versation. "You talking about that businessman who's been staying here off and on?" he asked Longstreet as he sat down on the barstool.

"Yeah. Mr. Smith."

"He's already in the area," Smitty said. "I just saw him at the Riddell House in Bradford." Smitty finished his draft and pushed the empty glass and the beer chip towards Herbicide.

Herbicide stood glancing over reservations in the book. "He's got a room reserved for the next three days," he said.

"The antique business must be pretty good up in this area for him to be coming up as often as he does, staying three or four days at a crack. He's not tending a camp anywhere."

Smitty leered out the corner of his mouth. "I don't think it's business that's bringing him up here, man. At least it didn't look like it when I saw him just a bit ago. Well, maybe monkey business."

"What do you mean?" Longstreet asked.

"Oh, he was all lovey-dovey with a woman. Sitting in a dark corner of the Riddell House by themselves, he patting her pretty hand. She looking real scared as though maybe he might be breaking it off with her or something."

"Who was it?" Longstreet's in-

terest was heightening. So was mine.

Smitty laughed softly. "It wasn't his wife, man, I'll tell you that. He was with that Colby woman, Marcia Colby. You know, the woman whose husband got knocked off here a while back. Hell, the worms haven't even gotten to her husband yet, and she's already worming around herself."

"Maybe she was a worm while he was still alive," Longstreet commented mostly to himself.

"That's what I tried to tell you guys," Herbicide butted in abruptly. "Bruce, Mr. Smith to you guys, he's got the money. He's got the walk and he's got the talk, and that's what it takes to get the chicks. And *does* he get the chicks. Worldliness and money. What do you guys have?—trees, guns, and pickup trucks."

Longstreet and I stood outside the inn getting ready to split for our respective homes. "Why would you want to encourage Herbicide?" I asked.

"I was about to do him a favor," Longstreet said. "But he got smart-mouthed, so I just decided the hell with it. We'll see how far his worldliness gets him tonight when he closes up about two thirty in the morning and there ain't no one around. I think he's going to find we've got

lots of things around this town to offer besides trees and guns."

"I don't understand." I truly didn't.

"Herbicide left his headlights on. And he's parked in such a way he'll never see them until he goes out to his car tonight after he punches out. We may not be worldly and we may not have much, but we've got something he ain't got."

"What's that?"

"Jumping cables." And he saluted me by tipping his baseball cap, adding that he needed to look at a few more things regarding the brooch and the camp break-ins and he'd call me the next day. "Something's out there," he said more to himself than to me. "I can sense it, but it ain't moving." He squinted as if to see through the dimness across the empty field near his house; then he turned and in long leisurely strides headed across the lot towards his truck.

Overhead in the slate gray sky I saw a large hawk winging its way eastward, back to its nest for the night.

"You out of bed yet?" Longstreet's voice boomed over the telephone early the next morning.

I told him I'd been up for hours, which I really hadn't.

Over the lump in the blanket next to me that was my wife I

looked out the window and saw the early morning autumn fog spread so thick it probably wouldn't lift for hours.

"How much do you think used furniture and electronics and guns are worth?" Longstreet asked.

"Plenty. But it really depends on where you're selling the stuff," I said. "You take a truckload to any city and start selling right off the back of the truck—"

"Or to an auction house," Longstreet interjected.

"Or there, although that would be a bit risky, but the markup might make it worth the risk. Especially if it's out of this area, like down in Pittsburgh."

"We've got a couple of things to do today. I'm trying to find Herbicide's girlfriend, the one he was trying to call the day Feldman was in the bar."

"Are you at home? I'll meet you there," I said.

"Yes, so drag yourself out of bed because I know you're not up yet. I'm trying to come up with a plan."

A short while later I pulled into Longstreet's driveway and saw him talking on a portable telephone. I overheard the last of his conversation.

"But you're not one hundred percent sure you had your answering machine on then?" Longstreet said. This was fol-

lowed by some uh-huhs and yups. "That's how mine's set. . . . I can't imagine how he could be any more obnoxious. . . . Uh-huh. . . . I don't know this Norton fellow. . . . We call him Herbicide down here." This last remark was answered with a loud, shrill laugh, a female laugh, a hearty laugh.

Longstreet hung up and took a seat atop his picnic table. I grabbed a spot next to him.

He drew in a long, stabilizing breath, held it a moment, and then said, "Let's take this from the beginning."

"That's a great place to start. Most of us start there."

"We have a rash of camp break-ins going on over several months. All nice camps, too. In one of these break-ins the thieves—and Mrs. Colby's right, there must be at least two—are interrupted unexpectedly by Charles Colby, who is shot and killed. How am I doing?"

"Well, you haven't gotten very far yet," I said.

"I'm getting there. There's more." He looked skyward, as far up as he could in the fog. "One of these thieves knows Sarah and gives her that brooch. Maybe as payment for services rendered. Maybe he, like Feldman, felt sorry for her. Feldman sees the brooch hanging around her neck, and he mentions this at the inn. Now remember, Feld-

man said he told Skull about it, but I'm going to guess Feldman was getting drunk and probably was talking a lot louder than he thought he was. With Feldman, the drunker he gets, the louder he gets."

"So anyone in the bar that day could have overheard him."

"Right. Skull, Herbicide, our Mr. Bruce Smith. Even those leaf-peepers, although we'll have to ignore them because there's no way we can do anything about them now. They were just families out looking at the leaves; in and out of our area."

"It seems Mr. Bruce Smith likes playing around with our women. Maybe he knew Sarah," I said. "And even though Feldman may not want to admit it, Skull might have taken some pleasure with Sarah, too. Add Herbicide or his buddy Norton to the list. They both like the chicks—Sarah got around, was well known. And for what she did she was well liked."

"Maybe someone bolted quick when Feldman described that brooch at the bar," Longstreet interrupted. "Just like the police did when that off-duty officer overheard the brooch being described later in Bradford."

"Because the brooch was a tangible link to Colby's murder," I added.

"Oh yeah. Someone got stupid

giving her that brooch, and then someone got real antsy hearing about it."

"And 'someone' decides to do something about it."

His head bobbed yes again. "Skull left to pop a deer. He may or may not have done that. But he's got blood on his sleeve. Skull and his son could be working the camps together; like father, like son. Bruce Smith left, and when he came back, he'd changed clothes. His business clothes? Or his bloody clothes? Bruce Smith would have an entire crew of movers to help him. And we know Mr. Smith has some kind of connection with the dead man's wife, even though they live in different sections of the state. It might be interesting to know how much insurance there was on old Chuck Colby. Maybe this thing's a whole lot different from a botched camp break-in. Maybe someone was using the rash of break-ins to cover up something else. Herbicide went outside to call his girl. I just found out from her—I'll tell you in a bit what she said—that he may not have called *her*. And Feldman said Herbicide was as mad as a hornet when he came back in. But who was he mad at?"

"What makes you think she was killed during the hours Feldman was at the inn drinking? I never heard an exact time

pinpointed that I recall. Just sometime that afternoon."

"I called the Pitt campus and asked them how long a class runs. It's usually forty or forty-five minutes. Sarah had just finished a one o'clock class, she said on that tape. So by a quarter to two the class is over. Give her another half hour or forty-five minutes to drive from Bradford to Johnsonburg. That puts that message at around two thirty. Just about the time Feldman mentioned the brooch in the bar and just about the time we got a whole lot of movement going on at the inn. Skull leaves, Herbicide telephones, and Bruce Smith may have left, too."

I thought about Longstreet's timetable, and the more I did, the more sense it seemed to make.

"Now I'll tell you a few interesting things about our buddy Herbicide."

"I can't wait. Give me the dirt."

"I just talked to his ex-girlfriend." Longstreet chuckled a bit to himself. "One, she said she broke it off with him, not the other way around. She said he was almost begging for her to take him back. This is Mr. Don Juan, mind you, begging. She said he was just too conceited and tried to tell her too much how to live her life and was al-

ways putting her down. After that she installed an answering machine, mostly so she could monitor calls as they came in. She was afraid Herbicide would keep calling her. But he never did, so Herbicide might not have known about the machine, she said. Did she have her machine on that day, the day he supposedly called her? She couldn't swear to it. She felt pretty sure she did, but because it was new to her, she said she sometimes forgot to turn it on. But if she had it on, Herbicide did not call *her* from the phone booth and let it ring and ring and ring, like he said. The machine, if it were working, would have picked it up. It's set to pick up on the first ring."

"Assuming she had it on," I said, "who would he have called?"

"Who knows. A partner, a partner who might have been with Sarah and given her that brooch. Someone like Norton. That would have been enough to put a bee in his bonnet, no doubt, to learn about the brooch at the bar. He would have been plenty scared. Hey, these guys have gone from breaking into camps to murder. They've got plenty of reasons to be nervous. Herbicide's ex-girlfriend also said this Norton fellow's a creep."

I started to say, "And so—" but Longstreet cut me off.

"Talking with the owner of the inn yesterday in the kitchen, I learned something else interesting about Herbicide. Apparently he's living way beyond his means. He's bounced several large personal checks to the inn, and they had to cover them out of his paycheck. They're about ready to dump him. He's just not working out there. 'Course, we already knew that."

"So, like Skull, Herbicide has some dire financial needs, but unlike Skull, Herbicide has an image to uphold. An image is the second heaviest load a man has to carry, you know," I told Longstreet.

"What's the heaviest?"

"A grudge," I said.

Longstreet let that sink in, nodded, and then said, "Well, we've got to come up with some kind of plan. We may be way off base here, but it won't hurt nothing to try. The police have their way of doing things. We've got ours. So let's put our heads together. How the hell can we determine which one, if any, of those guys had anything to do with this?" He let his eyes sweep slowly over the mountainous area. A few moments later he said, "Perfect. Ain't it perfect."

I wasn't sure what he was referring to: the beauty of our area and all that it embraces, or an

idea that had suddenly popped into his head. All I knew at that time was that I'd agreed to get the others to meet later that evening at Longstreet's house.

He pulled himself up from the picnic table and took the steps to his porch in one long bound.

The length of our meetings—me, Longstreet, Mary; Smitty, and Dempsey sitting in Longstreet's kitchen—tended to be directly proportional to the number of beers in Longstreet's fridge. Since there was less than half a case in there, and it was pitch black outside, getting late, I knew this one was winding down.

Longstreet had already explained his theory to the others, almost word for word the way he'd explained it to me earlier that morning. He also added that he'd contacted Feldman, and Feldman finally admitted that Sarah might have been seeing someone else besides him; that maybe he was no more important to her than anyone else; that he was a Romeo only in his own mind. But he had no idea who that other person might have been.

"They're hunkered down just like rabbits in the brush," Longstreet said. "Lying low and scared. There haven't been any major break-ins at camps since the Colby murder. Nothing's

moved since Sarah's murder. Maybe they're waiting for this thing to pass over."

"And that's why you've planned what you've planned?" Dempsey asked. "To get them moving?"

"You're getting smarter every day, Dempsey," Longstreet told him.

Dempsey, a likeable kid, was relatively new to our town, a wannabe woodsman, a transplant from Ohio, and although he wore the finest and most expensive outdoorsmen's clothes, all L.L. Bean, so he'd look the part, he was far from being there yet. Living here, back in the woods, with the woods, in tune with everything around you, is more than clothes and looking the part. It's a state of mind as much as it is a lifestyle. It was taking Dempsey awhile to get to that state of mind, but as Longstreet had just told him, he was gaining on it.

Longstreet skimmed over his plan again to make sure we all understood our roles. "You know what you have to do, Smitty. Be convincing. It's important that Skull believes you."

"Oh, I can be convincing because frankly, Longstreet, I may need to hire another person, and Skull's a good mechanic. I'm surprised I didn't think of him before. But if Feldman



don't get his problems ironed out, I'd probably have to hire Skull anyway. I'll invite him down to the inn for a few beers and talk to him about working for me."

"Make sure you offer him a decent wage," Longstreet told him, sarcasm dripping in his voice. "Something a little more than just a bit above right below minimum wage."

The rest of us chuckled, knowing Smitty was basically cheap.

"Dempsey? Your part?" Longstreet said.

"I'm to follow Skull if he leaves the bar."

Smitty added, "And if Mr. Bruce Smith leaves, I'll follow him. You sure he'll be there?"

"He'll be there," Longstreet said. "He's got a room reserved for three days. He's there almost every afternoon."

"And Herbicide's tending bar?" I asked.

"Looking at his time card and schedule, he's been slotted for opening tomorrow, Friday noon. He's off at six. We'll pull this off around two thirty." Longstreet turned and put his arm around Mary's waist. "Be there at two thirty, honey," he told her, pulling her in closer. "Your part has to be convincing."

"I've got the best job," she said, beaming like Longstreet had just handed her a large bouquet of wildflowers, something

Longstreet sometimes did, much to our surprise. People didn't normally think of Longstreet as a wildflower type of guy.

"I get to go shopping," Mary said. She reached into the back pocket of Longstreet's jeans, pulled out his wallet, and extracted his MasterCard card. "I'll use yours," she told him. "Mine's maxed out."

"Ohhhhhhhh," Longstreet shook his head. "This is going to cost me a few bucks, I can see that." He pushed at the typed list on his kitchen table, the list of items stolen out of Colby's camp that Mrs. Colby gave us.

It didn't surprise me that Longstreet's plan was as simple as nature itself, pulled right out of nature's gamebook actually. He probably saw it etched somewhere across those mountains he was looking at earlier that morning.

He might not even have been aware that that was what he was doing when he devised the scheme. He was one with nature, was in harmony with it, and sometimes it appeared the two were inseparable. There's much that can be learned from the woods and applied to our lives, and through the years Longstreet had learned about all of it.

Standing next to him at the

bar in the inn that Friday afternoon, with all principal players there, I thought of the hawk I'd been watching hunt the day Longstreet and I were talking with Feldman. I don't believe Longstreet saw that particular hawk that particular day, but he'd seen hawks hunt before and his plan to nail whoever killed Colby and Sarah and stole Bartlett's furniture was strikingly similar to the way the hawk hunts. Straight from nature, like I said.

Across the U-shaped bar, which was covered with sheets of copper attached with copper nails, we watched Smitty and Skull talking. Smitty gave us a nod of greeting, and Skull waved to us, looking content, relieved, almost happy.

Skull called to Longstreet over the noise of the jukebox, "You never brought that food up."

"Sorry. Didn't need to after all. Mary had it defrosted by the time I got home," Longstreet told him.

Skull waved his hand that he understood, muttered something about Longstreet having a damn good woman, and went back to finishing up business with Smitty.

Mr. Bruce Smith sat about dead center of the bar drinking mixed drinks with a young, pretty woman none of us had seen before. The auction house

owner had a pile of twenties laid out in front of him, and Herbicide was leaning way over the bar talking in low whispers with the couple. Herbicide's eyes darted enviously from Bruce Smith to his pile of twenties to the young thing Mr. Smith was buying drinks for. She looked a little bored, and it seemed like her mind was somewhere else. Judging by her dumb, dazed, lost expression, and by the way she was chomping hard on her chewing gum, I guessed she was probably the type that if you blew in her ear, she'd thank you for the refill.

Outside, across the street near the old deserted dance hall, Dempsy had the hood of his BMW up and was pretending to be fixing something in his car.

The clock above the jukebox showed two twenty-five.

Five minutes later, right on time, Mary came through the door towards me and Longstreet, and everything seemed to fall perfectly into place.

The song finished on the jukebox, and there was a lull in the barroom just as Mary came in so that everyone was able to hear her and Longstreet talking.

I don't know if it was part of his plan or not, but when Mary enters a room, almost everyone will take notice of her anyway,

the way she always seems to keep herself, nice and fresh as a rain-washed morning.

So, no doubt, all eyes were suddenly on her.

She waved at Smitty and Skull and gave Bruce Smith and his lady friend only a casual glance. Herbicide was scanning her up and down like he was visually taking her clothes off.

Longstreet said to the bartender, "Don't even wish it."

"I got the TV for the upstairs bedroom," Mary said to her husband in a voice loud enough that everyone would hear. Not that that was really necessary. Everyone was still eyeing her anyway, listening, watching her every feminine gesture.

"What'd you get?"

"A Sony."

"A Sony?" Longstreet said, his voice weighty with disapproval.

"Listen. Listen," she said, and touched his arm to calm him. "It's used, but I got it *and* a used Radio Shack VCR, too, complete with slow motion on the remote, for almost nothing. Won't that slow motion be fun for us?"

"You bought a Sony TV *and* a VCR? Ahhhh, how can we afford that? How much?" Longstreet was glaring at his wife.

Everyone likes to hear a man and his wife disagree in public (probably because it makes them forget about their own problems), and the people at the

inn that day were no exception. Skull was appraising the situation from across the bar, listening intently; Bruce Smith had a drink to his lips but wasn't drinking from it, and he never took his eyes off Longstreet's wife; Herbicide was still visually undressing Mary, but he also glanced over quickly at Longstreet as if he feared he'd be caught with his eyes in the cookie jar, so to speak.

Skillfully Mary added a few unrehearsed touches of her own, like looking around the bar at everyone as if she realized for the first time she was being listened in on. She whispered into Longstreet's ear.

"Where'd you get them at *that* price?" Longstreet raised his voice in disbelief. "That is cheap."

"Some guy I met at the bar in that new restaurant in Bradford, Carnegie's, the one they built out of the old library. I stopped there for lunch and was talking to a girlfriend of mine who works there, and I told her I was buying a TV 'cause you and I have that cable hookup in our bedroom now. This guy comes over to me, says he's got a slightly used Sony Trinitron and if I want to look at it he'll go get it. He said he needed to sell it and would let it go cheap. Then he mentioned the VCR and the remote and the slow motion

function. You're always telling me to slow down, that our camcorder can't pick us up. Now we can slow it down on screen."

Longstreet face flushed red, an intimate secret revealed.

Mary never missed a beat. She should have been an actress because she was really getting into her part, a bit more than Longstreet had bargained for, I suspected.

She went on. "He had a CD system, too, a good Panasonic with high quality speakers, but I told him that upstairs you and I make our own music and I didn't need those."

A titter of laughter came from someone when Mary made the last comment. Herbicide cleared his throat and fidgeted nervously. The lady with Bruce Smith scowled because Bruce Smith was paying more attention to Mary than to her. She chomped faster on her gum and shot Mary some nasty looks.

"So I've got the Sony and the VCR out in the car. Come on," she said to Longstreet and me, "you two can carry them upstairs."

Longstreet followed his wife out.

As they were leaving the bar, Mary dug her hands down into her tight jeans pocket. "Here's your credit card back," she told Longstreet. "I didn't need it after all. This was a cash-only

deal, so I drew money out of the bank."

While I downed the last of my draft, I looked around the bar at the principal players. Skull was twisting on his barstool, stuffing his money into his pockets and looking like he was getting ready to leave. Bruce Smith gulped down his drink and pushed the girl's hand off his arm where she'd laid it. I heard her say to him, "What do you mean you forgot you're supposed to meet someone? What about *me*? At least leave some of that money for me to drink on until you get back," she whined. Herbicide stood over by the cash register, his back to me, fiddling with something I couldn't see on the backbar.

### III

#### *The Kill*

"I was so nervous," Mary said trailing behind us as Longstreet and I carried the TV upstairs to their bedroom. It wasn't a Sony, but Longstreet had told Mary that since they needed another TV anyway she might as well go ahead and buy one. This way, if during Mary's role someone had gotten up and looked out the window, they'd have seen at least a TV in her car. There was no VCR.

"You did just fine," Longstreet

told her. "Well, maybe except for when you told the whole town about our homemade videos." The phone rang before Mary could reply. It was Dempsey calling from his car phone.

"Skull just left the inn," I heard him tell Longstreet. "I'll follow him, see where he goes, and then call you."

"It didn't take Skull long to get up and leave, did it?" Longstreet commented to me and Mary. "Damn. I was hoping it wasn't him."

"You've got him running," I told him.

"We'll see," is all he said, and stood staring out his window.

Dempsey called again a few moments later.

"I thought I'd better tell you," he said, "just as I was leaving to follow Skull, Bruce Smith came out of the inn, too. Smitty was right behind him. I'll call you, like I said, when I find out where Skull's heading."

"We scattered them like a flock of grouse," Longstreet said. "Everyone's moving. No, sir, it didn't take so very long at all."

"And Herbicide?" I asked.

"He's working until six. That'll give us time to check out where Skull and Bruce Smith go. You and I can follow Herbicide when he gets off if nothing with these two turns up."

We stood looking out Longstreet's living room window to-

wards the small section of the inn's parking lot we were able to see. From where we stood, we could also keep an eye on the phone booth, just in case Herbicide tried to use it again.

One of the local women who waitresses at the inn walked by Longstreet's house just then on her way to work the Friday night fish fries. As she hurried along, she patted her hairdo, taking curlers out, throwing them into her purse. When she saw us at the window, she waved and then made a gesture of disgust, telling us she wasn't really up to going to work just then.

Smitty called a few minutes later from another bar up the road. "Well, that's that," he said.

"Where'd Bruce Smith go?" Longstreet asked.

"Straight to Marcia Colby's camp. He's there with her now."

"Some guy," Longstreet said. "He leaves one sitting at the bar to go see another one. Must be tiring for him to have so many. Follow him if he leaves there," he told Smitty.

We waited a few more minutes, waiting for Dempsey to tell us where Skull finally ended up. Longstreet glanced down at his watch, frowned at the time for some reason or another, and then asked me, "What time do you have?"

I told him a few minutes to three.

Longstreet still seemed to be puzzling over something, something to do with the time, when Dempsy called back.

"Skull went straight to his son's house," Dempsy reported. "But I'll tell you, honestly he doesn't seem very worried or nervous or upset. In fact, it looks to me like Skull and his son are celebrating something. They're out in the yard, and they just raised their beer bottles in a toast. His son's setting up the barbecue now. Skull's bouncing his grandson on his knee."

"Toasting his new job—" I started to say.

But whatever it was Longstreet had been puzzling over suddenly broke to the surface. He slammed the phone down before Dempsy even finished talking and swore under his breath. "Let's get over to the inn right now," he said, hurrying out the front door heading for his truck, me a few steps behind him.

"What's up?" I asked.

"It's too early for that girl to be going to work waitressing. It's not even three yet. Dinner doesn't start till five thirty."

"So?"

He jammed his truck into reverse. "She also bartends. It looked like she hadn't even finished doing her hair. Have you ever known a woman to leave

for someplace important, like work, before she's fixed her hair? Unless she feels she really has to."

Sure enough, the local girl was behind the bar when Longstreet and I went in. Herbicide was nowhere around. The girl was frowning at the pile of dirty glasses left unwashed.

"Look at this mess," she said. "Honestly, I can't wait until they can him." She didn't like Herbicide any better than we did. She didn't like being called a chick or a babe. And she didn't like being called in to work a couple of hours early.

"Where is Herbicide?" Longstreet asked.

"He's gone. He just now left. He called me a couple of minutes ago and said he wasn't feeling well. Would I come in and work for him? What could I say? I wasn't going to stick it to the owners. Someone had to cover the bar. I tell you this, he wasn't so sick he couldn't light out of here faster than a scared jackrabbit."

Longstreet headed out the door. "Come on," he said. "If we hurry, we can still catch him on the Westline Road."

We hit eighty on the three mile stretch of the narrow macadam road leading out of Westline, and where the road intersects with Route 219, we spotted Herbicide's brake lights

just before he turned onto 219, heading south. Herbicide lived in Bradford, which is north of us.

"I wonder where he's going," Longstreet said. "Let's hope he leads us to the right spot."

We kept Herbicide in sight as we climbed the long hill towards Lantz Corners, staying behind a semi creeping slowly up the hill.

"How could I be so stupid," Longstreet suddenly banged his hand on the steering wheel.

"What do you mean? Looks to me like you may have done everything exactly right. He's committing himself; he's moving, and we're right on him. You couldn't have planned it any better. You couldn't have known he'd call in sick."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, why didn't I think about those drinks Feldman mentioned?"

"Which drinks?"

"The shots Feldman said Herbicide was buying the day Sarah was killed. Herbicide buying one of us drinks? No way. That cheap so-and-so hasn't bought us a drink since he started to work there. But what better way to make sure Feldman stays in the bar while Herbicide's partner takes care of Sarah than to buy drinks for Feldman, keep him sitting there?"

Longstreet was closing in, no doubt, closing the distance be-

tween us and Herbicide, closing small, unexplained holes in his theory as well.

"Who's his partner, you think?" I asked.

"I don't know, but hopefully we're about to find out."

Four vehicles ahead of us, Herbicide was still speeding south on 219, heading for Johnsonburg, Sarah Dulles's hometown. But before he got even halfway there, we saw him turn down a dirt driveway leading to what we always called the Brenner Farm. Sometimes people lived in the old farmhouse built next to the barn; other times the Brenner Farm sat vacant. It had to have been rented this time because as we pulled up to the driveway, letting Herbicide stay well ahead of us, we both saw the mailbox about the same time. R. R. NORTON was hand-painted on the metal box.

"So this is where old Norton lives," Longstreet said, like he'd just filled in another small hole. "Close enough to Johnsonburg for Norton to know Sarah. And that logging road where Sarah was dumped is only a couple of miles from here."

Through a stand of spruce trees lining the dirt road to the farm complex, we watched Herbicide get out of his car and in long, hurried strides head for the barn.

"We'll walk in from here,"



Longstreet said. He reached under his seat and pulled out his .44 Mag and holster.

When I looked at him, he said, "There could very well be stolen guns in that barn."

I said no more.

We crept along the driveway, keeping out of sight. A small, dust-caked window allowed us to peek into the barn. In there we could see Herbicide rummaging frantically through furniture, TV's, rolls of carpet, searching the huge pile of items he and Norton had stolen out of camps since spring and stored in the barn. No one else was around; no other car that we could see.

"That looks like Bartlett's sofa and chairs," Longstreet said as we watched Herbicide tear the pile apart. "He's looking for the Sony and the VCR. Let's go help him find them." Longstreet grabbed the wooden handle on the large barn door and swung it open wide, his pistol drawn out of its holster but held down at his side.

Herbicide jerked his head up at the sound of the barn door creaking opening. His mouth was agape.

Then he did a stupid thing.

He reached down and grabbed a double-barreled shotgun lying on top of some of the items stolen from Colby's camp and threw it to his shoulder at the

very moment Longstreet raised his .44 Mag.

And there we stood: me a step behind Longstreet, both of us looking down the two barrels of that twenty gauge; Herbicide looking down the barrel of Longstreet's .44 Mag.

A Mexican standoff, Westline style.

Longstreet said, his pistol held steady, "Don't make me go home and clean my pistol, Herbicide."

The hammer on the .44 Mag was cocked, as were the two hammers on the shotgun pointed at us. Herbicide had his finger in the trigger guard.

He didn't look as sure of himself as Longstreet sounded sure of himself.

In the ensuing silence I could hear wind rustle restlessly through the barn.

"It was a trick, wasn't it?" Herbicide said.

Longstreet nodded.

There was no way that Herbicide, if he fired that shotgun on purpose or accidentally, could miss us. I was hoping, and I mean really hoping, that Longstreet wouldn't pick this particular moment to antagonize him.

"It was a trick," Longstreet confirmed. "A woods trick, something from our world here."

I knew what they were referring to and realized Longstreet

had been aware all along that his plan mirrored nature. I had been foolish to think otherwise. It was the only real schooling Longstreet had ever paid close attention to—what nature taught him.

The Sony Trinitron, the Radio Shack VCR, complete with slow motion function, the Panasonic CD and speakers, all those items had been gleaned from Mrs. Colby's detailed list of stolen property. Longstreet's plan had been to recreate, more or less, the scenario at the bar on the day Sarah was killed. The same people were present, and Longstreet had hoped that if one of the camp thieves thought his partner was selling recently stolen, hot items connected with a murder in nearby Bradford it would be enough to get that guy running scared, to bolt, as he may have done when he heard about the brooch. From his years in the woods Longstreet knew that a frightened animal either hunkers down and keeps perfectly still or bolts. That's how the hawk finds its prey. It seeks movement. And it rarely misses.

Herbicide had bolted. If Herbicide had been born a rabbit, he wouldn't have lived very long in the woods.

The standoff continued for a couple of moments more, and then Longstreet said something

that gave me a glimmer of hope there'd be no gunfire.

"Ask yourself, Herbicide. Looking down the barrel of this pistol, ask yourself: Was Charles Colby the kind of guy who'd keep a loaded shotgun in the house? You met him briefly. What do you think?"

It hit me then, just as it must have Longstreet—Herbicide had just grabbed the shotgun. He'd never loaded it or checked it. Near him, on top of Colby's Sony TV, was a box of twenty gauge shotgun shells. But the box was closed, so it was impossible to see whether any shells were missing from it.

Herbicide glanced down quickly at the box. I could tell by the way his face had turned a pale, sickly color that he didn't know whether the shotgun he was pointing at us was loaded or not. What he did know was that Longstreet's pistol was loaded.

"Well? Was he?" Longstreet pressed him for an answer.

I never took my eyes off the trigger finger of that diseased piece of flesh holding that shotgun on us, ready to jump if I saw just a twinge of movement in that finger. But I doubted I could dive fast enough or far enough. The bores of those two barrels seemed bigger than a black hole in space.

"Time's up, Herbicide," Long-

street said. "Be one or put it down."

Herbicide frowned at the shotgun he was holding, as if it had just betrayed him, and I knew Longstreet had won. He rolled the gun over in his hands, lowering it slowly at the same time. First fear was etched into his face, then anger.

He slammed the shotgun down onto a small end table taken from Mrs. Colby's camp. With a deafening boom the shotgun went off when it hit the table, and both barrels discharged into the wall of the barn to the right of us, nearly putting a hole right through the old heavy barn wood.

I jumped. Herbicide jumped. Longstreet never flinched. "Someone should have told Charles Colby that it's unsafe to keep a loaded gun in the house," Longstreet said just before he told me to call the state police.

An autumn chill had crept over the area, as if Mother Nature had left a large door to the next season ajar and the cold air of winter was seeping in. Leaves were dropping at a steady rate, swirling in the air, and the near-iridescent clouds overhead were snow clouds. From here on out it would just continue to get colder each week. Still, it wasn't too cold to drink some beers on

Longstreet's porch. It never gets that cold.

Longstreet was saying to Feldman, who'd brought two cases of beer to celebrate his recent release, "I think what the cops are going to find is that Herbicide was in a good position to learn who was in the area and who wasn't. When I checked his time card in the kitchen, I saw he was working on the last Sunday that both the Colbys were there. I can hear one of them now telling Herbicide, 'See you all next weekend, as usual.' They might as well have said, 'We're leaving our camp unprotected for the week again.' And four or five of the other camps broken into—their owners also frequently dropped in at the inn, including Mr. Bartlett, who may have mentioned to Herbicide that he was going to Europe."

"And that's why they had to kill Colby?" Dempsey asked.

Longstreet nodded. "They had to kill him because Colby knew Herbicide from the inn. And they had to kill Sarah because she knew who gave her that brooch."

Herbicide and R. R. Norton, someone none of us had ever met and who was actually from Buffalo, had taken up residence in the county jail about the time Feldman was set free. The kid Feldman hit refused to press charges, saying he shouldn't

have said what he said, even if it was true. And Longstreet had made arrangements to have Bartlett's furniture returned.

We all stood in Longstreet's yard turning things over, explaining things to Feldman. Mary stood behind Longstreet, her arms wrapped around his waist, hugging him, pressing up against him, using his body heat to keep warm.

Longstreet asked Smitty, "How's Skull working out?"

"Good. Good. He's a good man. A little crazy sometimes, but a good worker."

Skull *had* shot a deer that day he said he did. But he'd taken it to his son so his family would have meat on the table. It was the venison they were getting ready to barbecue when Dempsey saw him setting up the equipment. Even though Feldman was back at work, Smitty hired Skull anyway, partly because he felt bad about raising Skull's expectations of finally finding permanent work and partly because he'd just landed a contract to repair and paint a fleet of trucks belonging to one of the utility companies. So there was plenty of work for everyone.

Smitty did, however, feel a little sheepish about Marcia Colby and Mr. Bruce Smith.

"Well, I just called it as I saw it," Smitty said.

It turned out that Mr. Bruce

Smith wasn't such a bad guy, a little too flamboyant to suit us but not a bad guy. And there was no affair between him and Marcia Colby. What Smitty saw as two lovers involved in something he'd misinterpreted—particularly her fearful look. It was the same fear we'd seen on her face before—perhaps the fear of being alone. That's a biggie. She was meeting with Mr. Smith to get appraisals for her insurance company from him, and that's all it was. In his business he'd know the worth of most of the items she'd lost. And he was interested in buying her camp if she was interested in selling it. That's why he'd been coming up so often—looking for property to buy. We'll know how that works out if we see him around a lot and never see Mrs. Colby again.

"So this Norton guy killed Sarah?" Feldman asked Longstreet.

"Yes. The police, from what I understand, have already obtained phone records from the phone booth outside, and sure enough there was a call made to Norton's number from that booth about the time you saw Herbicide on the phone. Herbicide told Norton to take care of Sarah and get that brooch and said that he'd keep you busy by plying you with drinks just in case you got some notion to go

see her. The police will undoubtedly also check phone records from Norton's place to Sarah Dulles's home about the same time."

"They had a large truck behind that barn," I added, "and were ready to start hauling the stuff to the Buffalo area to sell it. Apparently Norton's well connected up there."

Overhead I saw a hawk cruising in the chilly winds that were coming down from Canada and across Lake Erie a hundred miles north of us. It looked like

it was enjoying its easy flight, the winds at its back.

"Well, guys," Feldman said. He looked at Mary. "And girl," he added. "All I know is I'm free as a bird now. God, it's great to be like that, out of that cage, free as a bird. Birds and good men aren't made to be caged up." He took a swig of beer.

The hawk screamed, the way they do, more like a long, shrill whistle.

Longstreet studied the bird. "Amen to that," he said. "Amen."

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the June issue.*

The week-long First Americans Tour was designed to see and explore the ruins of ancient Indian cultures. Circulars were sent out to prospective clients. The response was overwhelming. Roy Wyatt, the archaeologist who organized the tour, was elated—even though he'd received an anonymous tip to expect trouble.

The tour was scheduled to start at Spirit Canyon. The only habitation near this archaeological site was the ranger station, which also served on occasion as a lodge. The registrants—six couples—began arriving, parking their cars beside the ranger station. They came from different states; one came from Wisconsin.

Wyatt welcomed all his clients, then announced, "If everybody's ready, please climb aboard the bus, and we'll be off on what I consider to be a truly great experience."

The tour bus was narrow, just six double seats, one behind another.

Each married couple sat together.

(1) The first three couples boarded the bus and took adjacent seats. Bob and his wife introduced themselves to Kathy and her husband immediately in front of them, then to Mr. and Mrs. Ransom just behind.

(2) The couple from Texas sat just behind Gina and just in front of Adam.

(3) Mr. McKay rode along in the seat just in front of Chet and just behind the man from Tennessee.

(4) Neither Inez nor Lola occupied one of the two rear seats.

(5) The three front seats belonged to Dave, Mr. Nolan, and the man from Virginia (with their respective wives, of course).

(6) Elmer is not married to Julia, Helga, or Mrs. Queen, and none of them comes from South Carolina or is one of the pair in the third seat from the front.

(7) The McKay, Nolan, and Queen couples include Franz, Lola, and the pair in the second seat from the front.

(8) At midmorning of that first day, the couple from Utah turned in their seat to chat with Mr. and Mrs. O'Shea sitting just behind them.

(9) The end of the week came, and Roy Wyatt was feeling relieved. Nothing unforeseen had happened by the time the tour bus returned to Spirit Canyon, where a farewell dinner was planned. Rooms had been reserved in the lodge for all six couples to spend the night.

The passengers filed out of the bus, tired and dusty but still enthusiastic. They went to their rooms to change and freshen up. Then one by one they sauntered into the dining room. Bob and his wife, Helga and her husband, and Mr. and Mrs. O'Shea sat at one table, and Mr. and Mrs. Parker, the couple from Texas, and the pair who had ridden in the fourth seat from the front of the bus sat at the other.

After dinner, Roy turned out the lights to show some slides and review highlights of their trip. When he finished his talk, he turned the lights back on again and said, "You were a great bunch. Perhaps we can do this again. Now, get a good night's sleep before you all start home in the morning."

A few minutes later one of the women dashed out of her room. "Oh, Mr. Wyatt!" she wailed. "Come quick! Someone has rifled through all of my luggage."

A man stuck his head out of the adjoining room. "Somebody's been in ours, too. My gold watch is missing."

"And my wallet," moaned another. "All my cash and traveler's checks—gone! Even my driver's license."

"Calm down," said Wyatt. "No stranger has been in the vicinity. I'll call the roll."

When he reached the last names, there was no response. "Hey," he said, "where's that couple who sat in the rear seat?"



No one knew.

"Well, they can't get far," declared the tour leader. "I'll have the ranger radio the state police to check all cars with \_\_\_\_\_ license plates."

*Who was the thieving couple? From what state did they come?*

### SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

Mel Nilson, living on the second floor of the east wing, was the hit man sent by the Mafia to assassinate Vincent Vinelli, who was hiding out in the apartment on the top floor of the west wing under the name Edward Darby. The informant was Kathy Banks, living on the third floor of the west wing.

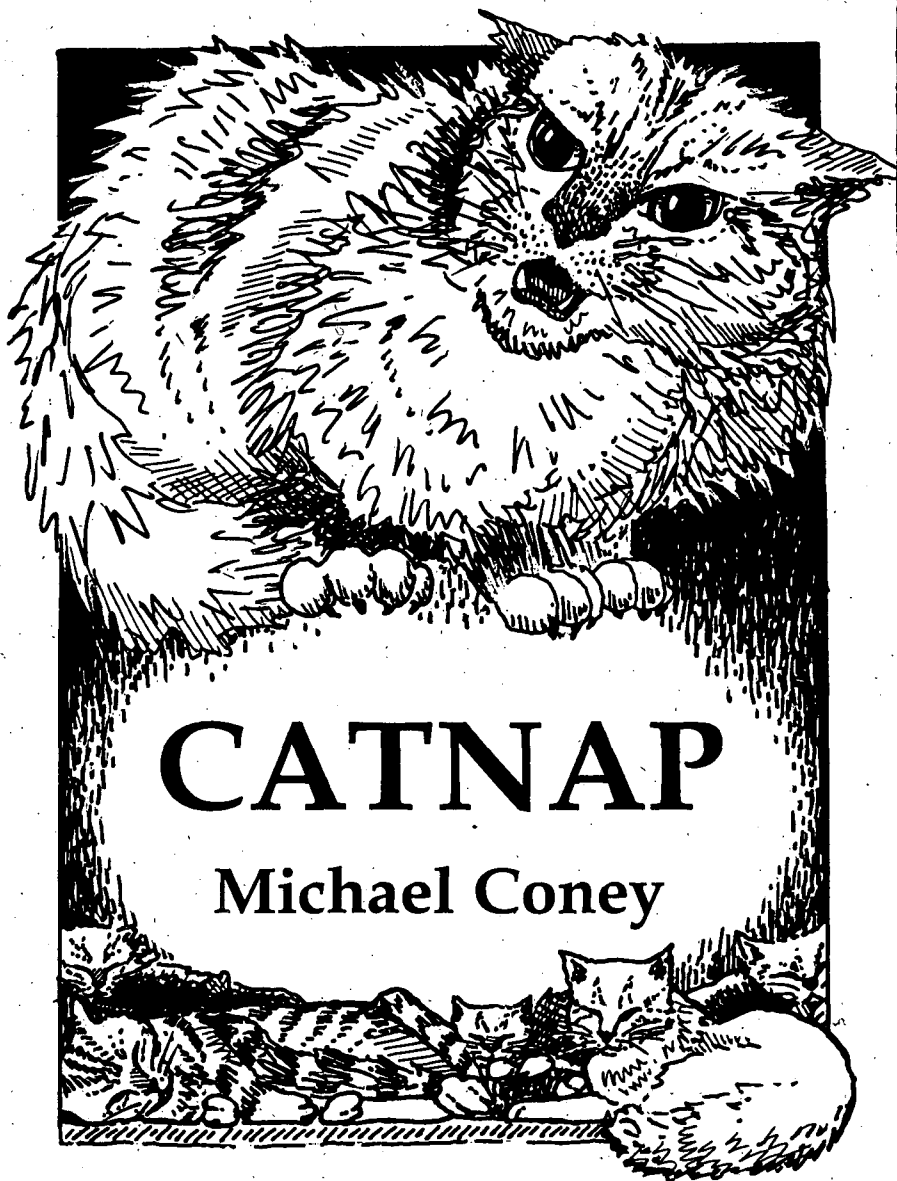
#### WEST WING

| FLOOR | HUSBAND      | WIFE   | BEDROOM   | LIVING ROOM |
|-------|--------------|--------|-----------|-------------|
| 8     | Edward Darby | Julia  | azure     | pea green   |
| 7     | Karl Jones   | Dorris | teal blue | brick red   |
| 6     | Peter Ashley | Maria  | eggshell  | white       |
| 5     | Alex Moore   | Celia  | tan       | yellow      |
| 4     | Henry Kilmer | Betty  | russet    | cerise      |
| 3     | Oscar Banks  | Kathy  | cerise    | pearl gray  |
| 2     | Larry Gelman | Angela | peach     | russet      |
| 1     | Dan Enders   | Gigi   | carmine   | peach       |

#### EAST WING

| FLOOR | HUSBAND       | WIFE   | BEDROOM    | LIVING ROOM |
|-------|---------------|--------|------------|-------------|
| 8     | John Parsons  | Ellen  | pink       | orange      |
| 7     | Floyd Inman   | Paula  | yellow     | azure       |
| 6     | Claude Holter | Ida    | orange     | pink        |
| 5     | Ivan Cosley   | Louise | white      | tan         |
| 4     | Norman Larson | Olive  | ochre      | eggshell    |
| 3     | Bert Fuller   | Helen  | pearl gray | teal blue   |
| 2     | Mel Nilson    | Flora  | brick red  | carmine     |
| 1     | George O'Hara | Nell   | pea green  | ochre       |

FICTION



# CATNAP

Michael Coney

“O kay!” snapped my mother to the grieving relatives gathered around her deathbed. “Prepare yourselves for a shock. You’ve all been laboring under a misapprehension. You thought I was deaf, didn’t you? Stone deaf. Well, that’s where you’ve made your big mistake. My hearing is as good as anyone’s here. In other words, I’ve heard every goddamned word you’ve been saying about me this past five years.”

It was an awkward moment. Minds racing, we ransacked our memories while the frail old lady lay back on her pillows, grinning wolfishly.

“In view of your obvious lack of appreciation for a lifetime devoted to nurturing you all,” she continued, “I’m changing my will. Previously you four were to share equally in the residue of my estate, after a generous bequest to my companion Thelma. But now I shall leave my entire fortune to the Purrs and Paws Cats’ Home. Every goddamned penny. Call my lawyer, William.”

A bitter blow. Dad had died five years ago, leaving Mother very well-heeled. Despite this, she’d retreated in on herself, a small bundle of vindictiveness dictating the course of our very lives from the comfort of her luxury mansion, filthy rich and,

apart from her supposed aural affliction, filthy healthy. “I’ve spent my whole life working my butt off to please your father and you children,” she’d snarled immediately following Dad’s funeral, “and from now on, I’m going to please myself and the hell with everybody else.”

We’d begged her to continue pleasing us, but it was a waste of time. “She can’t hear you,” said the doctor, one of Mother’s earliest dupes. “Shock can do this to an elderly person. The devastating loss of a loved one . . . Poor woman, she will never hear the song of a bird again.”

In this he was correct because Mother never stepped outside the front door from that day on, preferring to sit around in idleness, waited upon by her companion, Thelma, and deferred to by her children, us. We didn’t have Dad’s knack of amassing wealth and were forced to visit her frequently for financial discussions. It became the custom to join her for a family Sunday lunch, a spartan meal of cold meat and lettuce, after which she would offer grudging hand-outs as though she were tossing the more gristly bits of meat to a pack of hungry dogs. It was degrading, and she loved it.

Worse was to follow. By the end of the first year of Mother’s widowhood, it became apparent that she was getting through

Dad's fortune almost as quickly as he'd accumulated it. The sparse Sunday lunch was pure theater. Behind the scenes hid a reality of extravagance, bad investments, and charitable donations.

"We must do something about the old fool," mumbled my brother William forcefully one Sunday, through a mouthful of greasy mutton. "Otherwise there'll be nothing left by the time she shuffles off."

And so the Sunday get-togethers became brainstorming sessions around the inlaid walnut dining table, while Mother, in between bouts of unanswerable viciousness, sat smiling and nodding the way deaf people do, as though she could hear every word.

Which, we now discovered, she could.

We could have sited our think-tank somewhere other than Mother's dining room, but we were not a close-knit group and seeing one another once a week was quite enough. Now we were paying the penalty for five years of honest and open discussion. It seemed hardly fair. The four of us sat thunderstruck around the deathbed. The companion Thelma stood, white-faced.

William still found it hard to believe the evidence. "Not deaf these past five years? All right

then, Mother, what am I saying?"

She gave the sweet smile we'd always associated with her deafness. "You're saying, 'What am I saying?'"

"Oh my God," said William. William had been our chairman, the brains of the operation. In private life he was an unpublished novelist, although since Dad's death he'd devoted his imagination to dreaming up schemes to divest Mother of her fortune. "I could have been famous by now if I'd finished the novel instead," he'd once said sadly when his latest plot had been inexplicably foiled by Mother.

Sister Jane, the family's environmental activist, was the next to recover the power of speech. She said to Mother joyfully, "Not deaf?"

"Not now, not ever."

"Praise the Lord!"

"Nice try, Jane. And three years and two months ago to the day," the dreadful old lady continued, consulting her diary, "you attempted to bribe my companion Thelma to substitute ground glass for the sugar I sprinkle on my breakfast strawberries, one of my few indulgences."

"Not in *my* presence, she didn't," I said quickly. "I would never be party to a murder plot, you know that, Mother."

"I'll grant you were performing two weeks' community service at the time, and in any case you haven't the guts, you little crook. But perhaps you've forgotten that paper you tried to get me to sign? The one you slipped in among the share transfer forms three years ago?"

"I was trying to make life easier for you, Mother. Trying to spare you some of the harsh decisions elderly people have to make. Trying to protect you from the sharks that prey on wealthy old ladies."

"Trying to get me to sign a Power of Attorney is what you were doing. My God, if I hadn't noticed that greedy smirk on your face I'd have signed it, too. You'd printed it up to look exactly like my brokers' forms, you cunning little swine."

"It was a low trick, Mother," murmured brother Charles sympathetically. "I knew nothing of it. Robert was acting without our authority."

"I've no doubt, since it was his name alone on the form. He was trying to cheat you all. Nevertheless, Charles, you were the instigator of the attempt to have me certified insane last October, were you not?"

It had been a first-class plan; I had to hand it to Charles. Any stranger, listening to Mother's ramblings punctuated by outbursts of self-induced rage,

would have seen it as a viable course of action. But when we included the psychiatrist at our Sunday gathering—in the guise of Jane's fiancé—we were greeted by a happily smiling mother and a feast worthy of Thanksgiving. The old fraud then proceeded to behave with such lucidity and sweet intelligence that the shrink, on taking his leave, was talking of putting her up for Mensa.

"It was for your own protection, Mother," muttered Charles. "These bastards were trying to kill you."

It was the first sign of a split within our ranks. We protested our love and devotion, none more loudly than the faithful companion Thelma, who stood weeping at the foot of the bed. It did seem a little unfair that my mother should include this mousy and vulnerable woman in her diatribe. Thelma's presence at the brainstorming sessions had been only intermittent, as she served the cold meat and took away the greasy plates. She would have expected a few thousand in the will, at least.

"After all I've done for you," she blubbered.

"You were well paid."

"I've served you faithfully for over a quarter of a century," wailed Thelma, "far beyond the call of duty. I've put up with your tantrums, and I've pacified

the people you've offended. I've cleaned up after the cat. Good heavens, I've never even forgotten your birthday, which is more than you can say for your relatives here."

"I'm glad you mentioned birthdays, 'Thelma,'" said Mother in a particularly nasty voice, reaching under the comforter and producing a handful of birthday cards. She opened one and read, "To dear Agnes, the best employer a woman could ever have, from your devoted Thelma." Touching, huh?" She tossed it aside and opened another. "For Agnes on her eighty-first, more a mother than a boss, from your faithful Thelma."

"There you are, you see," said Thelma.

"The only thing wrong, Thelma my dear, is that you never sent these. You wrote a whole stack of them in advance, years ago." She brandished the card in skinny fingers. "My eighty-first birthday? Jesus Christ, woman, I'm only seventy-nine!"

Thelma's hands fluttered around aimlessly like butterflies snared in a lepidopterist's net. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

"And why did you write them in advance? I'll tell you why. Because your memory's no better than my children's. But when my birthday's come around and I've pointed out that nobody's re-

membered it, you've been able to instantly produce a card all written up as though you were just waiting to give it to me, to prove what a paragon of god-damned loyalty you are. You make me sick, Thelma, with your cringing and fawning and groveling. At least the cat has a mind of its own!"

"It was all meant in kindness," wailed Thelma. "You've no reason to talk to me like this!"

"Oh, haven't I? What about this, then? I found it with the cards." And Mother produced a well-worn sheet of paper, closely printed with columns of figures. "Actuarial tables, that's what. You didn't want to buy any more cards than you needed, huh? Eighty-three, that's how long the insurance people expect me to live. And I'm seventy-nine now and there are four more cards here. Too bad, I'm dying before my time. And you won't be able to get a refund on these cards because you've written on them. You lose on all counts, Thelma."

We regarded Thelma with a new respect.

"So there you are," said Mother. "Losers all. Have you got my lawyer yet, William?"

He looked as though he might refuse, but years of obedience were hard to shake. He punched

in the number and handed her the receiver.

"No, you talk to him," she said. "He thinks I'm deaf, remember? Just tell him I'd like him to drop by later. Tell him I'm failing fast."

William obeyed, sounding as though he had a mouthful of Jane's ground glass. "Yes?" he said after a moment. "Oh, I see. Of course I'll tell her." He replaced the receiver. "He's out of town on a case."

"Until when?"

"Thursday."

Her head swiveled slowly around like a vulture seeking the next meal, regarding each of us in turn. "That's soon enough. The doctors give me another week at least. Now get out of my sight, all of you. You're no family to me." Her withered hands fondled the sleek black fur of the cat, who'd been observing the field of human conflict without comment. "Mortimer is the only family I have, and when I'm gone, he'll live like a king at the Purrs and Paws. As to how the rest of you live, that's up to you. You'll get no more help from me. Perhaps you should think of getting jobs."

"We have until Thursday," said William. "Two days."

We'd reconvened at the Alfresco Bistro at the end of the street; Jane, Charles, William, and I

hunched grimly over cups of lukewarm coffee.

"What the hell can we do?" said Charles despondently. "The old hag's beaten us."

"Maybe we can start working together on this," I told him, still angry at his treachery. Then a thought occurred to me. "By the way, William. Was that god-damned lawyer really out of town?"

"Of course not. But she can hardly call him herself, can she? That would blow her cover of being a sweet, afflicted old lady, an object of pity and affection. It's important to her to be liked, right up to the end."

"And people *do* like her," said Jane. "It's amazing. She can make a hell of a good impression if she wants to. We're the only ones who know what she's really like. And if we told people, they'd never believe us. She'll fake deafness right up to the end. No, we're on our own, and we have to move fast."

"There's *Thelma*," I said. "Any chance of bribing *Thelma* again, Jane?"

"Poison's out. Mother's on her guard. And in any case she was in the process of firing *Thelma* when we left. Short of simply breaking in there and bludgeoning the old fool to death, I don't see what we can do."

"We can hire a hit man," said Charles.



"Do you know a hit man, Charles?" asked Jane. "I mean, do you number among your personal acquaintances a man with a dismantled rifle in his briefcase who plies for hire? No? Maybe you should try the yellow pages."

There followed a long, thoughtful pause.

"We can discredit the cat," said William suddenly.

"Discredit the cat?"

"We can discredit Mortimer so thoroughly that Mother becomes sickened by the very idea of cats, and by association, cats' homes. She'll find herself in a quandary, unable to decide what to do with her fortune. With luck she'll delay the decision until it's too late, and her original will will stand."

"How do we discredit the cat?" asked Jane.

"I don't know. Why do you have to be so goddamned negative? Must I think of everything?" The strain was telling on William. "I've provided the solution. Now you can flesh out the details." He swiveled away in his chair, significant body language.

I suggested, "We could feed Mortimer a powerful emetic. With Thelma gone, Mother will be unable to deal with it."

Jane snorted unpleasantly. "It'd take more than one lapse by the cat to change Mother's

mind. We'd have to keep sneaking in every few hours, and soon the cat would refuse to accept food from us. Mortimer's no fool, you know. Hell, he's divested that shrewd old cookie of her fortune. And we only have two days."

"It's a pity Mortimer's such a placid animal," I said sadly. "If he were more like Attila, now . . ." Attila was Mortimer's ne'er-do-well half-brother, a vile gray tom of no fixed abode who reacted violently against any overture of friendship. "A few unprovoked attacks would soon teach Mother who her real friends are."

"Some kind of drug . . ." muttered Charles. "Some shot that will turn Mortimer into a wild animal . . . I mean, if he kept *attacking* Mother . . . Two days would probably be enough. She has a short fuse."

"What kind of drug?"

"Oh, shut up, Jane."

"It needn't be a drug," said William suddenly, his inventiveness refueled. "We don't need a drug to effect a personality change. Mortimer's a very old cat. Already he has quite a tenuous hold on sanity. Have you noticed the way he drools from time to time?"

"Only when he hears the can opener."

"No, seriously. Sometimes he kind of shivers and goggles va-

cantly, as though he's hallucinating. His reason's teetering. All we need is to push him over the edge. Stress him beyond feline endurance. Mark my words, that cat will crack." He leaned back in his chair, smiling. "He'll be a savage beast by the time we smuggle him back into the house. He'll tear Mother to ribbons. That's when we step in with some kind of fishing net," by now his imagination was in overdrive, "capture the brute, save Mother's life, and earn her undying gratitude. Game over."

We gazed at him, impressed.

"So I suggest we return to the house," he continued, "in the guise of making a final appeal to Mother's parental affection. And on our way out, we snatch the cat."

"So how are we going to stress him?" asked Jane an hour later as we sat in William's living room, Mortimer fast asleep on the rug. The final appeal to Mother had failed as expected, but the catnapping had been an unqualified success.

"They say that fear of failure is one of the most potent forms of stress," offered Charles, who had been made redundant by disenchanted employers more times than we could remember. "The feeling that you've lost it somehow. That nobody wants

you. That you're on the garbage tip of society."

His whining got on my nerves. Charles was a loser; that was the truth of the matter. "You're talking stress? Try two weeks' community service swabbing out old people's homes. Then you'll know what real stress is."

"Unfortunately we don't have two weeks," said Jane. "Otherwise I'm sure we could volunteer Mortimer for community work. And as for Charles's suggestion, Mortimer has been accustomed to failure ever since he was neutered, yet he looks remarkably stress-free to me."

"When I said stress," said William, "I meant *stress*, real stress that makes a person scream for mercy. I mean, look at us. We're intelligent human beings; we invented the rack, the iron maiden, the gas chambers, the thumbscrews. The technology must be available to stress that mangy little animal out of its tiny little mind."

"Oh, you mean torture," Jane smiled. "That's different."

Charles was not happy. "I'd like it on record that I disapprove of torture. It's too risky. Suppose we went a bit too far and killed Mortimer? We have no wish to create a martyr. That would simply firm up Mother's resolve."

"I'm with Charles," I said. "We've no way of knowing when

Mortimer has reached the limit of his endurance. One minute he'll be mewling, the next minute he'll be dead. And then where are we? We've thrown away our best weapon."

William's face had reddened. Ever since his childhood this had happened when he didn't get his own way. "I always intended torture. All of you knew I intended torture. But now it's come to the test, you've lost your nerve. Okay, then. If you want to back out now, you can all go home, and I'll handle it personally—and believe me, I'll be the one with the fishing net who earns the kudos. Go on! Get the hell out of here!" He reached down beside his chair and picked up his fishing net, brandishing it in our faces. "This net is going to earn me a million or two!"

"We're with you, William," said Jane hastily. "I'm sure I speak for us all."

"Go ahead then," said Charles skeptically. "Torture the cat."

William tossed his net aside and seized Mortimer in a purposeful grasp, setting the animal on his knees. "Right, then, you black devil. This is it."

Mortimer commenced a deep, rattling purr.

"Bring on the thumbscrews," said Charles.

"This is it. This is it."

"Watch out for your pants," I warned him. "That looks like ex-

pensive fabric. Mortimer has sharp claws."

"Fetch me a box."

"What kind of box?"

William had gone red again. "Does it matter what kind of box so long as it's big enough? A fair-sized cardboard box, like the kind they give you at the liquor store when you've got too many bottles for a bag."

"Oh no!" screamed Jane. "Not the liquor store box treatment!"

"It's not going to work, William," I said quietly. "Not this way. We can't do it. Even you can't do it."

My voice seemed to calm him. William was silent, his right hand absently stroking Mortimer, who raised his head, hoping to be tickled under the chin. He looked distressingly sane. We became silent, too, as our vision of millions began to slip away. The room reverberated to Mortimer's purring.

**"T**welve hours left," said William heavily.

It was the evening of the following day. We'd visited Mother, fawned over her, gotten nowhere, and reconvened at William's apartment. Mortimer lay dozing on the rug. He seemed to have settled in well.

"That nurse," said Jane. "Did she look bribable to you?"

"I wouldn't know a bribable nurse if she brought me a bedpan. You noticed Mother reminded her to call the lawyer first thing in the morning? That was for our benefit."

"We've lost," moaned Charles. "Let's face it, that black brute has beaten us."

But William was looking thoughtful. The juices of creativity were flowing again. "The nurse has only started visiting Mother recently, since she got ill. She doesn't really *know* Mortimer. Not on a real person-to-cat basis. Am I right?"

"So far," said Jane cautiously.

"And Mother's eyesight isn't what it was. Hell, she's seventy-nine and dying. You can't expect her to have the eyesight of a woman of twenty, can you?"

"It depends on how good the woman of twenty's eyesight is," Jane pointed out.

"Let's say it's a good average. Just for the purpose of the discussion. Twenty-twenty."

"All right, then Mother's eyesight is probably not that good."

"There we are, then. That's the answer." He smiled around at us triumphantly. "It was right under our noses, and we didn't see it. It's all so simple. We simply substitute Attila for Mortimer."

"Attila?"

"You remember, Jane. Mortimer's half-brother. The vicious

brute that attacks kids in the park down the road. He attacked you once. He'll attack Mother as soon as look at her."

"But Attila's gray."

"So we dye him."

She considered it for a moment. "All right, then. But how do we catch him? It's getting dark already. Good grief, the police have been trying to catch him for years."

William uttered a snort of laughter. "I imagine we're a little more desperate than the police, Jane. And darkness is on our side. Attila is at his noisiest during the hours of darkness. Any of my neighbors will attest to that. His whereabouts will be obvious."

"I don't know . . ." She was doubtful. "It seems such a roundabout way of getting our rights."

"It's Attila or the bludgeon, Jane."

"Okay, then. I'll pop round to the corner store and get the dye before they close," said Jane, suddenly agreeable. "You three can hunt down Attila. That way we fulfill our traditional sexual roles, so there's less chance of error."

I don't think any of us were convinced by Jane's reasoning, since we'd all been quailing at the thought of hunting down, on his own territory and in the dark, an animal with the feroci-

ty of a cougar who has just seen a coyote sniffing at his kill.

"If she thinks she's got the best part of the deal," said William with a careless laugh as the door closed behind Jane, "just wait until she has to hold Attila down in a bucket of dye. Dyeing is woman's work, traditionally."

In fact we were back at the house with Attila within an hour by the clock, although it seemed much longer. Jane was waiting in the hallway with the dye dissolved in a bucket. "So, how did it go?"

"No problem."

"Where's Charles?"

"Just popped along to Emergency, nothing serious."

"And Attila's in that box?"

"In the net, in the box. He's all yours." The box, with the net handle projecting from under the flaps, was progressing across the floor in a series of ponderous bounds. William placed a restraining foot on it. Attila, frustrated, gave tongue. "I'd leave him in the net if I were you, Jane," shouted William. "Just lower it into the bucket."

Jane took hold of the handle and lifted. The cardboard flaps parted. "My God," she whispered in awe as Attila came into view.

"The thing is," said William, "to think of him as a mere animal. A domestic cat, no more. If

you're not careful, it's possible to start ascribing mythical properties to him. Supernatural powers. That's what happened to Charles. He became transfixed and unable to get out of the way in time. It's Attila's eyes, mostly."

"And the claws," muttered Jane, letting go of the handle. "And the teeth."

"For me," I said, "It's the aura of evil surrounding the brute. I can almost feel it. God, I don't think I'll ever set foot in that park again." There had been one truly appalling moment when Attila's nightfall caterwauling had ceased and the whole world had gone quiet; even the wind had dropped. We'd stood there breathlessly under the trees, unprotected. Where had he gone? *Where was he, exactly?* And then just a few feet away, a shrill squeal as of a terrified mouse—or, as it transpired, the hinge of an imitation horse provided by the municipality for kids to rock to and fro on. Attila had jumped onto the end of it. His monstrous form stalked across the dusky skyline as my knees gave way and I sank to the ground.

I am ashamed to admit that I took no part in the subsequent charge led by William, and when I heard Charles screaming, I covered my ears.

"Just a cat," said William,

brushing Jane aside and seizing the handle. He swung net and cat out of the box and in one smooth arc deposited them both in the bucket of dye.

It occurred to me that we'd probably need a drink afterward, so I withdrew quickly to the kitchen where William kept the scotch, slamming the door behind me. While I was searching for a shot glass I heard sounds of vigorous activity from the hallway, and before long I was joined by William and Jane. William bore a line of deep parallel scratches down one cheek, and Jane was sucking her thumb in a curiously childlike manner.

"He got out of the net," William explained, tossing back his scotch with a shaking hand. "Matters got out of control. He seemed beyond all reason."

"But he's still in there? You didn't let him escape back outside or anything?"

"Do we look like fools?" Jane removed the thumb from her mouth. "My God, I need a tourniquet on this. No, he has the run of the hallway, that's all. It's no big deal. He's still a prisoner, technically."

William poured himself another scotch and began to dab it on his cheek. "The hallway is the only way out of this apartment. Technically, Jane, we're the prisoners."

"You mean we're trapped?"

"On a temporary basis, yes."

"But suppose there's a fire?"

"You'd better not light one."

"So where am I going to sleep?"

"What about my toilet bag?"

I have a lot of respect for William's behavior at this point. A lesser man might have indulged in an interminable argument with his sister, but William gave a dismissive wave of his hand and said, "Here's my plan."

**I**t had worked like a charm. William had already bought a can of cat food for Mortimer; this was diverted to Attila, dosed with Valium contributed by Jane. The door was cracked open, and the dish was slipped through. After the initial snarling and the crash of a heavy body against the door, a thoughtful silence prevailed in the hall. Then came the awesome sounds of Attila feeding.

It had been the work of a moment to truss the unconscious cat up the following morning and place him in the box. William then bound the box with parcel tape through which ran strong nylon threads.

"Just in case he comes round in the car." He handed me a utility knife. "But otherwise, make sure you take him out in Mother's room and put him on her bed. Say we found him exhausted and wandering, and he's

sleeping it off. Keep referring to him as Mortimer. That dye did a good job. His fur's a little matted, but that's consistent with the lost cat gambit. Give Mother our love and tell her we'll drop by later."

"Much later," said Charles, who'd returned from hospital in the small hours, his arm and neck heavily bandaged.

Suddenly it all seemed to depend on me. "You're not coming?"

"We all bear the scars of last night's encounter," William pointed out. "Mother would ask awkward questions. You're the only unscathed one."

"You're going to earn a lot of Brownie points," said Jane, "restoring Mortimer to her bosom."

"And subsequently rescuing her from a crazed animal," added Charles. "Don't forget to take the net."

So ten minutes later I was pushing open Mother's front door, the box under my arm, the net in hand. All was quiet. I put the box on the hall table, quickly slit the tape, hauled Attila out, and freed him from his bonds. I couldn't tell if he was breathing. He hung limply over my arm; hopefully this meant that rigor mortis was not setting in.

I carried him through to Mother's bedroom.

There was a particularly bale-

ful look in her eye that unnerved me, and I found myself speaking quickly. "I came across poor old Mortimer wandering in the park, lost, poor old guy, what a shame." I was babbling; Mother's stare often had that effect on me. I laid the cat on her lap. Her face was set in an expression of profound suspicion—but then, it usually was. "He's a bit matted, but he'll clean himself once he wakes up. He's exhausted right now."

"Oh my God."

For a worrying moment I thought Mother had seen through the substitution, but then I realized her lips hadn't moved. The incorruptible nurse had slipped into the room and was regarding me with horror.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, I . . ." she seemed rattled; her gaze flicked from me to Mother and back. "I haven't had time, you see. It was so sudden, and I called the doctor and I was going to call the family in a minute, but . . ."

And she reached over the bed and, with a practiced gesture, closed Mother's eyes.

There's only one reason a person closes another person's eyes. It's when the other person is too dead to close them themselves. "It just happened?" I asked, a great hope dawning.



The lawyer wouldn't have been yet; it wasn't even nine o'clock.

"At eight forty-two," she said precisely.

"I'll call my brothers and sister from here. They're all at William's place." I regarded the body with a great feeling of release and freedom. "Poor old lady, she fought a good fight. I . . . understand her lawyer was dropping by this morning; some minor matter. I'd better call him, too."

"It's all right, there's no need."

Her words were uttered quite casually, but they had a curious effect on me. It was as though, on lifting clear of the runway, the engines of my Boeing 747 had faltered. William the novelist would have described this feeling as a nameless dread. "Huh?" I grunted.

"The lawyer came last night. She made a new will. I witnessed it."

I observed the niceties. I sighed and gloomed and stuck around while the doctor earned an easy couple of hundred. I called William's place. He exhibited a generalized rage which, after a moment or two, began to focus on me, so I put down the receiver. On the nurse's recommendation I called an undertaker; apparently it was what you did in these circumstances. I poured myself another drink.

The doorbell rang. It was Thelma, the ex-faithful companion.

"You're too late," I said.

"Oh, I know Agnes passed away. The nurse called me. I've just come to pick up Mortimer and take him to the home. The old lady would have wanted it. I understand she provided for him well." There was no bitterness in her tone.

"Yeah, she saw her lawyer last night. We lost out."

"Oh, I don't know." She was surprisingly cheerful, a resilient woman.

I found this irritating. Had she no concept of the magnitude of the disaster? "Too bad about the birthday cards. It won't be easy getting a job at your age, Thelma."

She smiled sweetly. I was reminded of Mother's deaf smile. When you've lived with a person long enough, you pick up their mannerisms. Then I noticed the panel truck standing outside. There was a picture of an insanely grinning cat on the side, and the words PURRS AND PAWS CATS' HOME.

"You work for the cats' home now?" I said, disappointed.

"Actually," she said, "I've bought the cats' home."

While I hung onto the door frame for support, she continued, "The whole deal went through yesterday. They were very anxious to sell, which suit-

ed me. I got the place at quite a good price. Of course, I had to borrow a tidy sum from the bank, but," she smiled again, "I understand I'll be able to pay that off very soon. Have you any idea when the lawyer will be reading your mother's will?"

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"So I'll take dear old Mortimer now, if you don't mind."

I turned and walked thoughtfully back into the house.

The cat lay at the foot of the bed where the doctor had put him. A huge paw twitched, claws extended like daggers,

then retracted temporarily.

Attila was coming round.

I picked him up and carried him to the door. Immense muscles were beginning to stir beneath the matted fur. I handed him to Thelma.

"He's a bit of a mess," I said apologetically. "He was lost for a couple of days."

"Missing me, I expect," said Thelma. She placed Attila on the passenger seat and climbed in herself.

I closed the door for her. It was the least I could do. She drove off into the rush-hour traffic.

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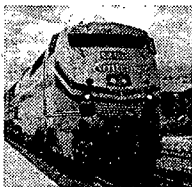
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# BLOWBACK

William Beechcroft



**C**old rain sliced through my headlight beams. I knew the night was going to be miserable, but in the half-light of early dusk I had no inkling of how miserable it would shortly become. At the

moment, I was preoccupied with my memories of Homer Pitt.

Homer had been a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at the time I'd taken early retirement from the City of Brotherly Love's police department and

set myself up as a P.I. He was the only reporter who believed I'd had no part in what became nationally infamous as the "Schuylkill Scandal." I was clean and he knew it, but the coverup needed a patsy. Me. I resigned in disgust. He resigned in protest and exiled himself clear across the country to these foothills of the Cascades where autumn rain now pelted the roof of my travel-weary Bronco.

The slick macadam wound through a pine-forested valley. The town of Horsewhip was no more than a mile or two ahead. I hoped that the burg had a passable motel—or that Homer might have a spare room for a night or two. This was the westernmost point of my vacation swing, and I needed a breather before I turned back east.

The black hill on my right gave way to open country. The road made a tight swing to the left. I drove past the first scattered houses of Horsewhip. On the phone yesterday, Homer had told me to watch for his place on the right. A hundred yards farther, there it was. The office of the *Tri-County Watchword*—a blaze of light even at this evening hour. But Homer had told me that he'd be working late on a breaking story. "Not much of a hardship," he'd said. "I live upstairs."

I pulled up out front, stepped

bareheaded into the downpour, and dashed across the sidewalk. Then I froze, but not because of the frigid mountain air.

The first floor office was a single big room behind a gray-tinted plate glass storefront window with TRI-COUNTY WATCH-WORD in a gold-lettered arc at eye level. In there was a desk, filing cabinets, a cluttered worktable, an electronic typesetting machine, and some other items I barely noticed. I barely noticed any of it after a first glance because my attention was nailed on the most significant factor in that one-man newspaper office. Homer Pitt himself. Sprawled on the floor beside the typesetting machine.

Dead. That was obvious even from out here in the dismal rain. A portion of his skull was missing. And now I spotted the bullet hole in the window, just below the first W in WATCHWORD. A hole big enough to accommodate a .45 caliber slug.

Though nothing could be done for Homer now, I tried the adjacent door. Ex-cop's reflex. It was locked. I stood there a moment. What now?

A light had flashed on in an upstairs window across the road. As I glanced up, I heard a car start a couple of hundred feet down the macadam. I squinted through the darkness. The car's dim shape leaped

away from the shoulder. No lights. Then, just before it disappeared around a bend toward town, the taillights flicked on, and the brake lights flared. Well, one brake light. The left one.

Talk about suspicious behavior! I swung around the rear of the Bronco, yanked open the door, and scrambled in. I got the thing fired up, howled off in hot pursuit, whipped around the bend, and found myself in downtown Horsewhip.

I raced along the main drag, three blocks of assorted businesses and a couple of side streets that climbed the mountain to my left and dived into the valley on the right. A scatter of dim streetlights. Nobody on the sidewalks. No sign of the other car.

But a big indication that this little whistle-stop had a police department. Or at least a police officer. He straddled the middle of my lane with both hands wrapped around a revolver of significant size. It was pointed straight at me.

I stood on the brakes. The Bronco screeched to a halt with the front bumper just ten feet from the crouching cop.

"Out of the car!" he yelled. "Hands where I can see 'em!"

I shut off the ignition, climbed out with my arms crooked upward, mindful that it doesn't

take much these days to activate a trigger finger.

"Face the car. Hands on the roof." The metal was as cold as his voice. Frigid rain stung the back of my neck as I felt his hand pat me down. All he discovered was my wallet. I'd left my Glock 17 back in my office in Radnor.

"Put your hands down. Turn around."

Now I had a close look at him. Young, maybe twenty-five. What I could see of his blond hair was cropped short below his black Stetson. Ex-military, I deduced from his terse manner.

"You got any I.D.?" he demanded.

"In my wallet."

"Take it out of the wallet and hand it to me." This kid was all procedure.

He scanned my Pennsylvania driver's license.

"Mr. Montgomery, we're going to the station house right there behind me. Turn around, walk ahead of me, and keep your hands where I can see them."

He stepped aside. I walked past him with my arms down, but angled outward.

"What about my car?"

"I'll come back for it and pull it over next to the department's unit in front of the station house."

What he called the station house was a converted store, its

former display window now bricked in, its door steel with a little wire-glass window. The station was wedged between a liquor store on the left and a secondhand bookstore on the right, both dark by now as were almost all downtown businesses. The only light here came through the reinforced window in the metal door, and it was partially blocked by a head peering out at us.

The door was swung open from the inside by a chunky cop in uniform, his thinning hair showing gray. Medium height, chilly blue eyes. Clean-shaven except for a hint of gray stubble. He looked like a man who'd been around.

"This is him, chief," the cop behind me announced. "White vehicle, Pennsylvania plates. Just like she said."

"Good job, Pincus."

Pincus? I'd hate to be a cop named Pincus.

He handed my driver's license to the chief, who studied it and then said, "You. In the holding cell back there."

"Now wait a minute! What—"

"Leaving the scene of a crime," the chief said. "That'll do for starters."

"Now wait just one minute, chief. You've got no reason to hold me on—"

"We've got a witness."

Ah, the light in the window.

"Witness told me she saw you leaving the newspaper office," the chief went on. "And she saw a body lying on the floor in there. Caught your yellow and blue rear plate. Then you come hightailing through town. I'd say that's enough to hold you on."

"Is this an arrest?"

"Call it protective custody."

"You can't—" I began to squawk, but of course he could. This was his town, and I was the stranger who had just been seen racing away from a killing. The cell door slammed shut.

"Coffee's over there. You can reach it through the bars." The chief grabbed his own black Stetson from a wall rack near the door, clapped it on. "Come on, Pincus." He pulled on a navy blue jacket and said over his shoulder, "I'll be back after we check out the scene."

Out into the dismal night they went. I heard the front door being locked from the outside. A swell vacation stop this had turned out to be. I felt a manic impulse to wail Mother!

The coffee wasn't bad, but the sugar substitute was. No creamer. Looked like the chief was fighting a weight problem. I sat on the cell's creaky cot, sipped Mr. Coffee's brew, and surveyed my surroundings. Two battered wooden desks, the inevitable metal filing cabinets, a computer



terminal, fax machine, a radio setup.

I pondered my position. In jail more than three thousand odometer miles from home base. The only person I'd known here was lying dead in his office, which was the reason I was in jail. My fingerprints were on the victim's doorknob, and from what Pincus had said, some vocal citizen had seen me roaring away from the crime scene. I'd been in worse spots, but I was having a hard time remembering when. The only bright part of all this was that I'd refrained from shouting, "I know my rights!" That was considered by a lot of cops to be the tag line of a criminal.

A little after nine, I heard a siren wail by, probably whatever passed for a medical examiner in this northwestern outback. A while after that, the chief returned minus Officer Pincus.

He hung up his now sodden hat and strode back to my cell. "First time I've had a suspect in custody before the crime scene was checked out. You ready to talk?"

"I've been ready since I got here, chief. An open book."

"Uh-huh. You did leave the scene in one hell of a hurry, according to our witness." The chief fished out a pack of Camels, offered it.

"No, thanks." I'd given up smoking long ago.

He lit up, took a long drag that must have smoked his innards all the way to his toes, blew a cloud toward the fly-specked ceiling fluorescents.

"Go on," he said. "Tell me your story."

I told him I'd seen Homer lying in there, tried the door, which was locked, then about the other car. "Didn't your man Pincus see it go past?"

"That car—if there was another car—must've gone by here before I rushed him out there to stop you." The chief gave me a long, silent look. "Something about you, the way you're handling this . . . You a cop?"

"I was. Philadelphia PD. Now I'm a Philadelphia P.I. Office in Radnor." I pulled out my private investigator's card and held it up between bars.

"Oscar Fogarty," the chief said, but he didn't stick out his hand. "What are you doing in Horsewhip?"

So I gave him the background. Vacation trip, chance to drop in on Homer to offer sinfully belated thanks for sticking by me those long years ago. "Found him like you just found him, chief. Side of his head blown off, bullet hole in the window. Somebody stood out there and shot him." I told the chief about the car with the burned-out

brake light. He was a good listener, so I pressed my luck. "Can I ask you a couple of questions, Oscar?"

"Go ahead, Elrod."

"Please. Rod." I hate the name Elrod. "Question number one. Did your witness hear the shot?" Because if she did, she surely had told Fogarty and Pincus that it was a while before she saw me out there. Time enough for the shooter to have run most of the way to his car.

"She said she was in the can when she heard it, in the back of her place. She's seventy-seven years old. Took her a couple minutes to get up front. By the time she got there, she says she saw you coming out of the newspaper office."

"By the time she got there, chief, your man was gone, and I'd pulled up. Simple as that. Your man got away."

"Unless you're my man, Rod." Fogarty's uneven teeth gave me a big smile, but his eyes didn't kick in.

"That brings up my second question. Who in these parts would want Homer Pitt dead?"

"Interesting thought, Rod." With the toe of his snakeskin cowboy boot, Fogarty hooked over a nearby chair, straddled it backwards, rested his arms on the chair's back. "He was a pretty hard-hitting newspaperman. Owned his one-man weekly, so

he didn't have to worry about what a boss thought. Wrote everything himself, had it printed over in Firdale."

"What were his main beefs?"

"The logging business, of course. Show me an Easterner who doesn't think we're wrecking the countryside out here. And there was Cascade Parksite. Homer was dead set against that."

"A housing development?"

"Worse. An industrial park. The out-of-state developers want to put it in the valley just east of town, bring in all kinds of light manufacturing."

"Sounds like it would be good for business here."

Fogarty grimaced. "It'd be a damned disaster. There aren't near enough people in Horsewhip to fill a tenth of the jobs the developers say they'd have there. It'd bring in a whole bunch of new people, more than live here already. Cardboard housing, trailer parks. Boomtown, USA. Homer was against it. We all are."

"Except for somebody here who might be invested in it."

"Yeah, could be." His china blues narrowed. "By some chance you couldn't have any money in it, could you?"

"I don't have any money to invest, period. If I did, it wouldn't go into real estate speculation."

Man in his fifties needs something more like mutual funds."

"You married, Rod?"

"Not now."

"You had supper?"

"Come to think of it, no."

"The Horsewhip Cafe down the street is still open. What can I bring you?"

That meant I was still stuck in here. But at least the chief wasn't going to try starving a confession out of me. "What's passable?" I asked him.

"Hot beef sandwich, maybe?"

"That'll be fine. You want money?"

"Technically you're a guest of the town. It'll go on the taxpayers' expense account."

So this wasn't costing me anything but my freedom.

He was back in a half hour with my sandwich and a side of baked beans seriously blended together in a Styrofoam container. And with a dapper fellow of perhaps forty; tall, dark, Errol Flynnish with Flynn's natty mustache. He was dressed in the very best of knife-creased trousers and a dark jacket of some nifty fabric. Raindrops glittered on its sheen. We were being visited by the local fop.

"This is Leslie Lamont," Fogarty announced by way of introduction. "Friend of mine. Ran into him at the diner. We got talking, and he thinks you're

getting a bum rap. Les is a lawyer."

Lamont thrust his hand through the bars. "Pleasure to meet you. Rod Montgomery, I believe the chief told me your name is." He had a hearty, dry grip. "Chief Fogarty is only doing his duty, of course, but I believe he has arrested an innocent man. I'd like to be of help."

I'd been in town not even two hours, and here was a Bronco chaser offering his services.

"I'm not aware that I need a lawyer."

"I'm distressed at your treatment," Lamont said. "I'm offering my services pro bono."

Well, that was interesting. I chewed a plastic forkful of gravied beef. Maybe I had a living friend here after all. "What did you have in mind?" I asked him.

Lamont turned to the chief. "Might Mr. Montgomery come out of there or do I go in? I detest speaking through bars."

"You go in." Fogarty pushed the chair toward him. Take this with you if you want."

"And, of course, you will relocate to the front of the office, chief. My client and I wish to consult in private."

"Okay with me." Fogarty unlocked the cell door. In came Lamont with the chair. Fogarty left the cell door open and retreated up front. Apparently he

didn't expect me to flatten Lamont and make a break for it.

I'd never heard of a free lawyer in a case like this. Well, a public defender, sure. But not a sleek Leslie type with his glistening jacket—which he now removed and carefully hung over the back of the chair. Beneath it he wore a Western-style shirt of soft butterscotch suede.

I dug into the baked beans. Heavy on the molasses, but I like them that way.

"First, Rod," Lamont said, "I need some background."

I sighed but I put down the container and went over the whole thing again. He listened with his eyes shut and his fingers tented.

Then he said, "Do you know how much time elapsed between the point when the witness—Mrs. Wenzel, I believe the chief told me her name is—between the time she heard the shot and you saw the light go on in her apartment?"

"I have no way of knowing that. You'd have to ask her."

"The chief did, and she claims it was no more than a minute or two. Yet you just told me you saw a car start up and leave without lights several minutes after you got there. Something doesn't add up, does it?"

"Looks like her word against mine."

"And you are the outsider

here. Tell me, assuming for the moment you are the killer, what could you have done with the gun? Thrown it into the woods just before you hit the curve into town?"

I bristled. "What kind of a question is that, counselor?"

Lamont smiled. "Hypothetical, Rod. Hypothetical. Homer told me down at the cafe that you had some difficulties in Philadelphia that became public. Now, still pursuing that hypothetical line of thought, might you have come here to Horse-whip to settle an old score with former Philadelphia reporter Homer Pitt?"

I glared at him. What was this? Then I realized he had been talking loudly enough for Chief Fogarty to hear him. Either this was a put-up job between them, or—

Abruptly Attorney Lamont stood, picked up his jacket, and walked to the cell door. "I'll do what I can."

A promise if kept, I figured, made this only the first of many cells to come. Then, as he pulled on that magnificent jacket, still aglitter, it hit me.

"Chief!" I called as the front door shut behind "my" lethal-lipped lawyer. "Where did he leave his car?"

Startled, the chief said, "Gave me a ride back in it from the diner. It's out front."

"Check his brake lights when he backs out."

"You gotta be kidding, Montgomery." But he peered through the little window in the door. I waited, almost quivering.

"Only one brake light," Fogarty called out.

"The left one."

"Damned if it isn't. Could be a coincidence, and it doesn't really put him at the scene of the crime."

"But there is something that does, Oscar." And I told him what it was.

Thirty-seven minutes later, Leslie Lamont returned, this time accompanied by Officer Pincus.

"What in hell," Lamont spluttered, "is the meaning of this? I know my rights, Fogarty!"

Uh-oh, Leslie, the cops' rule of thumb.

"No gun in his car," Pincus reported.

"Thanks, Pincus. You can go back on patrol. Leslie, sit down," Fogarty ordered.

"This is lunacy!" Lamont protested.

"If it is, then you've got nothing to worry about."

"Well, you have," Lamont growled. "False arrest for openers."

The chief was unruffled, which made me feel immensely better. "I'd appreciate a look at

that impressive jacket of yours," he said.

"Are you serious?"

"Sure am. Hand it over—and, damn it, sit down."

"I don't see what this has to do with anything at all."

"The jacket." Fogarty's voice was brittle.

Lamont eased out of his jacket. "Be damned careful of this. It's mink-dyed virgin vicuna." He handed it to the chief, who handed it to me.

With a magnifying glass Fogarty had dredged from his desk drawer, I peered into the jacket's fine fibers. No doubt about it. What I'd thought was the persistent glisten of raindrops was something else entirely. The jacket had been peppered with tiny glass particles.

I nodded at the chief.

"You tell him, Rod." I'll be darned, I thought, the chief is going to let me have my moment. Maybe it was his way of making up for his high-handed treatment of a couple hours ago.

"Glass is elastic," I said.

"And cornbread is square. What is this?" Lamont challenged. "A physics lesson?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. You might think—I guess you did think that a bullet going through glass leaves all its debris on the exit side. But when a slug hits glass, especially a big sheet of it, the glass bends with

the impact. Then it snaps back—hard enough to throw particles almost twenty feet toward the shooter. It's called 'blowback,' Leslie. You were a lot closer than twenty feet to that window. Your jacket tells us that. A forensics expert should be able to match these particles with the gray-tinted glass in Homer's storefront."

"This is just plain nuts," Lamont protested.

I ignored that. "My guess is that when I showed up outside the newspaper office, you were on your way back to your car. You'd parked it down the road to avoid a problem like I had with my car in front of Homer's place. You drove into town and ducked into the side street nearest the restaurant. Your leisurely appearance there could be a pretty good alibi if nobody checked the timing right to the second."

I paused, waited for his reaction, got none, and plowed on.

"I figure that on your way into the restaurant, you saw Officer Pincus take me in. When Chief Fogarty showed up for dinner a few minutes later, you pumped him for details and saw a chance to come back here with him and help pin the killing on me."

Now Lamont threw me a black look. "Aside from all that fancy fiction, what possible motive could I have for shooting Homer Pitt?"

"How about the Cascade Parksites project?" Chief Fogarty suggested. "I've picked up two rumors on that. One, the out-of-state developers have a mysterious local rep. Two, Homer Pitt was working on an exposé of the whole project."

"By the way, chief," I couldn't resist putting in, "I'm willing to bet that you'll find the gun in that little stretch of woods just before the curve into downtown. My attorney here as much as told us that."

Leslie Lamont said nothing. The fire in his eyes had gone out.

Fogarty broke the silence. "You are under arrest for the murder of Homer Pitt. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

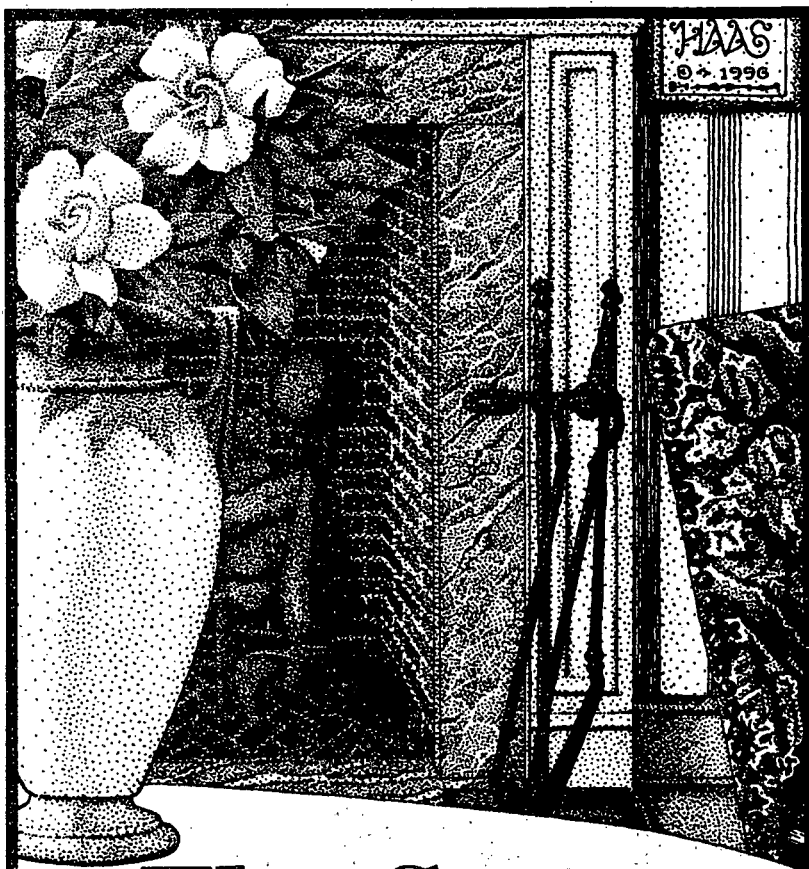
When he finished, Lamont stared at the floor.

"Haven't you anything to say, Leslie?" the chief asked.

Lamont's head came up. He glanced at Fogarty, then glared at me.

"I want to call my lawyer," he said.

FICTION



# The Scent of Murder

**Barbara Kennedy**

Illustration by Friedrich Haas

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She sprawled in her ruffled nightgown across the eyelet bedspread, on her back, blonde hair in one of those awful frizzy perms, blue eyes rolled back from her heart-shaped face, a ragged gash in her forehead, blood everywhere. The rose-scented air freshener she sprayed all over the house tickled my nose and made me sneeze. I forced my hand to pick up the phone so that I could report my sister's murder. The line was dead.

I blundered my way down the dark stairs to the kitchen. The telephone receiver lay on the counter. I replaced it to get a dial tone and made my call. Then I went into the bathroom to throw up.

Everybody knows everybody else in Lake Winona, that little bastion of old Florida in the center of the state. Someone at the sheriff's office called my husband Burt. He kept his arms around me while the homicide detectives tramped around upstairs. The detective in charge was Steve Springer, who was in my high school graduation class and therefore my age, thirty-eight. Our sheriff, Ollie Anderson, paid a visit to the scene to look it over and give me his condolences. Re-elected every four years since I was in high school, he's always there to curry a vote for the next election but has the good sense

to leave the real work to the experts.

"I'm real sorry, Emily," Steve said when he came downstairs. He's a slender man with red hair and skin that always looks as if he's been out in the sun. "Real sorry," he repeated. "I'll let you get on home as soon as I can, but I'm going to have to ask you some questions."

"Just be as quick as you can," Burt said. "She's in shock."

"Sure, Dr. Vallance," Steve said. "All I want right now, Emily, is you to tell me what happened this morning. First off, what made you come over?"

Marcia Loomis, the principal at Oak Hill Elementary, had called me at a quarter to nine—Anni hadn't shown up for school. They'd been trying to call her since a little after eight o'clock, when classes began, but her phone seemed to be off the hook. I drove to my sister's house, arriving about five after nine, and found her dead upstairs.

"It takes twenty minutes to drive from your house over here?" Steve asked, knowing damned well that it took ten.

"I changed my shoes, brushed my hair, washed up a little. I was out in the yard when Marcia called." Putting in a new strain of pale pink day lilies; I still had on my khaki gardening shorts and PTA T-shirt, the

same outfit I'd worn to drive my kids to school.

"You weren't concerned that something might have happened?"

"Twice before, Marcia's called, and I've come over and found Anni was out late the night before and left the phone off the hook so she could sleep in."

"It looks like it happened not long ago. Did you see anybody?" I shook my head. "Lance Praeger lives here, right? He wasn't here?"

"His truck was gone. Anni's car was in the garage."

"The garage door up?"

"It's always up. The whole place was wide open. She never locks a door."

"How do her and Praeger get along?"

"I don't know. We don't see much of them."

"You sound like you don't approve of him living here."

I thought of the day I first heard his name, a November day as sunny as this one but less humid, six months ago, when Marcia called me and I routed Anni out of bed. Usually she did her carousing on Saturday nights, but once in a while she felt the urge to disrupt the monotony of the work week. I railed at her and asked who she'd been out with. She said that his name was Lance, he worked at the Shell station, he

fixed her brakes. Amazing—she had her brakes fixed. I bought gas on my way home and checked him out in the mechanics' bay. Just what I expected, twenty years old, tall, dark, and Southern with a ponytail hanging out of the back of his baseball cap.

"Where is he?" Burt asked. "He's the one you should be grilling, not Emily."

"We'll find him," Steve said. "Okay, Emily, just one more thing and then I'll let you go. I don't see any sign of a weapon. Will you look around, see if anything's missing that might have been used."

It was Burt who noticed the poker missing from the antique fireplace set. A heavy iron poker with a sharp-bladed end and a brass curlicue on top. I went back to the bathroom and threw up again. Steve said that I could go home but he'd need to talk to me later. "I'm real sorry about Anni," he said.

Everyone was sorry about Anni, born Anne Elizabeth.

Our great-grandparents on both sides were founding families of our little town. Our mother's parents built and lived in the house where Anni now lay dead. We moved in to take care of Grandma after Grandpa died. I was an honor student in high school, went to college on scholarships, married a medical

student who was now the local GP, had two children in the right order, properly spaced, named after their grandparents. William Edward was eleven, Margaret Jane eight. Now that they were settled in school, I was getting involved in local politics. Ice cubes were less square than I was.

Anni married right out of high school and had two divorces within five years. She was younger than I by two years, the sweet blonde beautiful one. I grew into the role of protector because that's what everyone expected of her darker, stockier, stronger sister. The people of Lake Winona looked up to me and clucked only mildly over my sister's escapades, as if my rock-bound reliability made her irresponsible ways acceptable.

I refused the tranquilizers Burt offered. "I want to feel everything now and get it over," I said, but all I felt was numbness as we brought our children home from school and tried to explain what happened to Aunt Anni. Friends came over with food, answered the phone, made pots of coffee. Somebody brought gardenias from their yard; the sweet and heavy scent hung in the air like death.

Judson Pratt, our county school superintendent, appeared among the throng and grabbed my hand, his grief like a raw

wound on his face. He reminds me of the country mouse, a slender, grey-haired man with a droopy grey mustache and wire-rimmed glasses. The newspaper gave his age this year as fifty-four, but I think he was older than that when he was born. He'd bought the house next door as a showplace for his treasures, and he'd had a soft spot for my sister from the time he started coming to the house to buy the antiques Mama sold one by one as Papa's income dwindled. He and Doris had no children, and so he doted on Anni. Poor Judson. He needed comfort, too, with Doris dying of cancer in the ground-floor den now turned into a bedroom. There was a nurse with her all day while he was at work.

"I can't believe she's gone," he said with tears in his eyes. "I just can't believe it."

"I can't either, Judson. How's Doris?"

"It won't be long. She had a real bad night, and the nurse was late this morning. I didn't get to work till nearly nine o'clock." He blew his nose and said, "I can't believe Anni's gone. You shouldn't have *let* her take that young boy in."

It was typical of him to lash out when he was upset. I'd had run-ins with him when I was PTA president.

I said, "Anni did what she wanted."

"You should have *stopped* her. I gave her a job, tried to help her straighten out. I can't believe this."

His eyes watered again. He backed away from the gardenias, wheezing into his handkerchief. He's so allergic that he won't go outside the day the yard man cuts the grass.

Steve came over later in the afternoon. He'd found the real estate contract in which Burt and I offered to buy my ancestral home from my sister for two hundred thousand dollars. He looked around Burt's study, where we'd taken him, at the leather furniture and the shelves of books and the Oriental rug on the polished parquet floor and said, "That's a heck of a lot of money for that old place."

"We didn't want to live in it," I said. "We wanted to tear it down, sell the property. Even if we lost money it would be worth it."

"I thought Anni loved that old house."

It was one of my irritations that my sister, so modern when it came to getting divorced and shucking off her responsibilities, revered the shaky house and the dowdy old furniture as if they were national treasures, while I'd always hated the primitive

plumbing and lack of central air conditioning. There were window units in strategic rooms and ceiling fans throughout, but if we had a cold spell in the winter, you might as well move out because there was no way to heat those drafty, high-ceilinged rooms.

"It's falling apart," I said. "I hoped if she saw in black and white what she could get for it she'd sell." More correctly, I hoped that if Lance Praeger saw dollar signs he'd talk her into selling.

"I guess you and the doctor put a lot of money into that house," Steve said sympathetically. "When'd you show her the contract?"

"I took it over Sunday after church. There was nobody there. I left it on the kitchen table."

"We found it under the bed, the other side to where she was lying."

"Praeger's side," I said. "Is he your chief suspect?"

"Right now I'm open to anything, but it looks like it had to be somebody that knew the house. Any itinerant could have gone in and found her there in bed, but they're not going to know to go downstairs and get the poker."

"They could have prowled around the downstairs first," Burt said. "Taken the poker be-

fore they went upstairs, in case someone was there."

"You'd like to think it was somebody came in off the highway, didn't know her."

"I just can't believe anyone who did know her could do such a thing," my husband said.

Even in my grief, I could believe it. Anni was sweet, affectionate, happy-go-lucky, but when backed into a corner she was as obstinate as most weak people are when they want to appear strong. How many times had I said helplessly to Burt that I could kill her. I pulled myself together and asked Steve if he had any leads.

"A lot of people called in, said they drove past the house this morning. Some of them are legit; then there are the kooks you get on any murder case. One guy said he saw a masked man, and we got the usual sightings of UFO's. A couple of people said they saw a car over by the side of the house, but nobody saw a truck pull out. We talked with Praeger's mom and dad; they said he was going to Tampa today, look for a job. I'll let you know if anything turns up."

Sitting on a half acre of ground beside a country road that became a busy highway, the old family homestead looks bigger than it is because of the second story and the porch

columns. Tourists probably liken it to Tara as they whiz past on their way to Disney World forty miles south. Up close it's more reminiscent of *Psycho*, a wood frame house erected in the twenties before anyone paid attention to building codes, if there were any in Winona County. Anni inherited it two years ago when Mama died.

As Mama explained to me a thousand times, Anni loved the old place and I never cared for it, and besides, Burt and I had a beautiful home in Spring Hills and didn't need any help. Poor Mama; she never could understand why plain, prickly Emily had a free ride through life and sweet, beautiful Anni had such a hard time. She died calling for Anni, while I sponged her face.

It was fine with Burt and me for Anni to inherit the house, or would have been if she'd sold it, as we thought she would, and moved to a condominium. We have some condos even in Lake Winona, with new appliances and modern toilets and door-knobs that don't come off in your hand. But Anni said that the house was her history and she loved old things, and refused to acknowledge that the place would have fallen down years ago if Burt and I hadn't propped it up.

In all the years that we'd tak-

en care of my parents' health and welfare until, one after the other, they died, Burt never complained. My family was his family. Anni lived in the old house with them periodically, between marriages and boy-friends. We paid for her psychiatrists and practically hand-carried her through the local community college and two universities until she scraped together enough credits for her elementary teaching degree. I talked Judson Pratt into hiring her.

We understood why Mama and Papa didn't want to move out of the house. They were old and afraid of change, and still saw it as the showplace it had been when Grandpa built it. We kept it going to let them have contentment in their last years. Anni's refusal to sell was sheer stubbornness. We told her that she was responsible for its upkeep. No problem, she said. My parents had been grateful for the help we gave them; Anni wouldn't acknowledge that she needed any help.

"I'll fix it when I'm good and ready," she declared, with water dripping through the roof onto the electrical connections. "I'll take care of it," with termites swarming around the porch supports. "I can look after myself," with a wave of her hand while

the interest piled up on her Visa bill.

All these years Burt had been as tolerant of her as everybody else. She was his little sister, too. Sometimes, when Anni was hugging and kissing this comfortable bear of a man who shelled out money, I wondered if his feelings ran deeper than that. How could any man, married to an efficient woman who barely managed to look attractive even on a good brown hair day, resist Anni's beauty and warm nature?


But even Burt ran out of patience when Lance Praeger moved from the status of boyfriend to that of live-in lover. He'd been fired and needed a place to stay, Anni said when she came to bring Easter baskets for the kids last month, as casual as if she'd taken in another stray cat.

"You can't do that in this county!" I protested.

"Schoolteachers are supposed to set an example. Marcia'll fire you."

"Judson won't let her," she said with the complacency of someone born beautiful. "Anyway, she can't tell me how to live my life. If she fires me, I'll sue the county."

I refused to be distracted from my subject. "He doesn't have a job," I cried. "Who's going to support him?"



"Not you, if that's what you're worried about," Anni observed as she wrapped a blue necklace around the neck of a Godiva chocolate bunny. The Easter baskets were filled not only with candy but with presents. I noticed a hand-held computer game in William's. If I chastised her over how much she'd spent, she'd say that the Easter bunny paid the bill. "Anyway," she continued as she rearranged the artificial grass in the basket, "I might quit. I'm thinking of starting a wildlife center. We have raccoons coming every night, eating out of our hands. We could get donations, have nature trails, it would be great! Lance said we could get a big tax deduction."

"Deduction from what? He's not earning anything."

It was at this point that Anni went home, with a shrug of her slender shoulders and a toss of her beautiful head. I repeated the conversation to Burt after dinner when the kids were in bed and he'd had a chance to read the newspaper. He leaves for rounds too early to read it in the morning and leafs through at night unless he's chauffeuring for the Scouts or gymnastics or the school band.

"Damn it," he cried. "Raccoons spread rabies! Don't let the kids go over there if she starts making pets of them."

I began to wish I hadn't mentioned it. Burt is a worrier by nature, conscientious to a fault, never caught up with his hectic schedule, eating on the run and twenty pounds overweight as a result. That night, with his grey hair receding and his shirt pooching over his belt, he looked older than his forty years.

"It'll probably fall by the wayside like all her brilliant ideas," I said, and put down my book. "Why don't we take a little walk? Just up and down in front of the house, just to get some air."

"I'm too tired." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, quiet grey eyes as steadfast as twin anchors. "You know what this means? We'll have *two* of them to support. Do you know how much we've spent on that house since Anni inherited it? I make good money but we have two children to educate."

I said defensively, "I could go back to work."

"Why?" Burt demanded. "I like our lifestyle. So do you."

He was right. I had a degree in computer science and had taught it for a few years while Burt was interning and setting up his practice. At this point in my life I wouldn't go back to that. I'd probably start my own business, but I really didn't want to spend the time away from home I knew it would take,



or get involved with the endless paperwork. I was perfectly happy setting my own schedule and using my skills in volunteer work.

"She's the one who has to change," Burt said. "If she'd just sell that house, I wouldn't care what she did."

"She won't," I said, "because it's the thing that binds her to us. Without the house, how can she keep getting our attention?"

"For God's sake, Emily, that's what *kids* do. Can't you make her grow up?"

He went off to bed, mad at Anni, at himself, at me. My sister was threatening my marriage. I had to act.

I thought of keeping my children away from her and knew that I couldn't do it. They'd be hurt as much as she would be. She often said that the only thing that kept her in the classroom was the kids. Sometimes I thought it was too bad she couldn't have any, and sometimes I thought God knew what He was doing. She doted on our children, and they adored her. But her own would never have gotten to school on time, never have known regular mealtimes, would have had to come to Aunt Emily and Uncle Burt for lunch money. They'd have been loved, though. She had plenty of that.

Lance was picked up that evening at a McDonald's in

Tampa after the counter girl recognized him from his picture in the paper. Predictably, he insisted that Anni was fine when he left the house around eight o'clock but admitted that they'd quarreled the previous night and early that morning over his decision to look for a job outside Winona County. Anni was so upset that she refused to get out of bed. He took the phone off the hook to let her sleep.

"He said she was in bed when he left," Steve said when he called to give me the news the next morning. "Doc Brandeis doesn't think she could have been killed before eight o'clock, maybe a little later. Of course we only have Praeger's word that he left at eight."

"What about the poker? Did he have it?"

"That's at the bottom of a lake somewhere, I shouldn't wonder."

"Or the bottom of Tampa Bay."

"I'm not so sure he did it," Steve confessed. "He seems like an okay guy. Real broken up when I told him what had happened. Says he didn't want to keep mooching off Anni, he's been looking for a job since he moved in."

"They were going to start a wildlife refuge," I said. "With raccoons. Maybe Anni finally got wise to him, told him to get

out, he lost his temper and attacked her. Then he ran to Tampa."

"He was planning to go there before this happened," Steve said. "His folks knew about it when I talked to them. That's how we knew to put his picture out down there. He swears he never touched her. Said they were going to get married."

"Maybe he'd rather marry a woman with two hundred thousand dollars than one with a falling-down house. Maybe he saw the contract and got mad because Anni wouldn't sign it."

Afterwards I wished I hadn't said that. It gave Burt and me a motive, too.

The next day Steve gave me permission to go into the house, since I would inherit it. Typically, Anni had refused to make a will; she said that kind of thing depressed her and since I was her closest relative I'd get it all so why bother? After I researched Florida's inheritance law and found that she was right, I stopped hounding her to go to a lawyer. As I said to Burt, better that I inherit it by default than that she leave it to one of her sorry boyfriends or some way-out charity.

I felt a compulsion to go over there to commune with my sister who'd never grown up, to explain why I did the things I did.

Burt wanted to come with me. He mourned for Anni; I saw the lines of grieving in his face. But the stress was off him now. He was his old self, my gentle husband, my kids' kind father, squeezing my hand whenever we came into contact, letting me shed my private tears in his arms, understanding when I said that I had to go by myself this time.

It was a hot spring day, heralding the long and humid summer ahead of us. I turned the key in the lock of the house that I knew I'd sell as soon as my name was on the deed. The window air-conditioning units were turned off. Inside, the air was hot and sticky and reeked of Anni's rose-scented spray. I walked through the small dark rooms. There was Daddy's recliner where he'd lain for months before we took him to the hospital, the old oak table my grandma loved to set for Sunday dinner, Mama's sewing machine. But it was Anni's presence that filled every centimeter as I went slowly from room to room and up the stairs.

The police had taken the bloodstained sheet and mattress. I stood beside the stripped bed with the rattan headboard Anni had painted white. The rose scent was heavy in here. My eyelids prickled, and my nose began to run. I took a tis-

sue out of my bag and thought of poor Judson, who really had a problem.

That's when it hit me. I stood stock-still. Judson, driving past on his way to the school board office, late that morning so that a few more minutes wouldn't matter, seeing Anni's car still there but Lance's truck gone, Lance who'd spent the night, spent every night, with Anni. I saw Doris, bedridden in the last stages of her terrible disease. I saw a man who knew the location of every one of Mama's antiques, including the fireplace set, from the years when he'd gone there to buy them. I saw a man whose adoration of my sister I'd thought was paternal, who lashed out when he couldn't handle his stress, a man who wouldn't go outside on the day the yard man mowed the lawn. I heard his ultimatum to Anni and her defiant reply, saw him go downstairs for the poker and leave the house with a handkerchief over his face because that damned rose spray set off his allergies.

"That's really reaching," Steve said when I barged into his office. "The county superintendent murders one of his teachers because she lets a guy move in with her?"

"It went deeper than that," I said. "And he might not have got rid of the poker. It's an antique.

There's a good chance he couldn't bring himself to throw it away. I'll bet it's hidden in his house somewhere."

"I can't search his house, Emily," he protested. "I don't have any reason."

"You will have if you can place him at the scene." I told him about Judson's allergy. "You said somebody reported seeing a masked man leaving Anni's house. I think that was Judson with his handkerchief over his face because of that awful rose spray. Find out what time he was seen, what time he got to work. Check with Doris's nurse, she'll know when he left the house. I'll bet you'll find some time unaccounted for."

"If I don't, and Judson finds out I was checking up on him, my job won't be worth squat."

"Check back with those people who said they saw a car near the house that morning, ask what make it was, what time they saw it. You have to," I insisted as he frowned at me from behind his desk. "I know I'm right."

I talked him into it and went home. There were cars parked in front of our house and Judson's, people walking up his drive. I recognized the mayor and a couple of businessmen. Doris. I joined the retinue. Someone said that she'd died early that morning.

Judson sat on a couch in his Victorian living room while friends took turns comforting him. I waited until they dispersed. Judson's face flushed when he looked up at me.

"I'm sorry, Judson," I said.

He shook his head with tears in his eyes, and I knew that he wasn't crying for Doris.

"You thought you were going to marry Anni, didn't you?" I asked. "All these years you were in love with her, but you were married. Then Doris got sick, and you thought, at last. But Lance came along and ruined everything."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" he cried. "All I did for your sister and you let her take up with every piece of

scum came down the pike!" His voice was high and piercing. People looked our way. "My poor wife died this morning, and you come over here carrying on about your sister," he sobbed.

Friends came over, murmuring, "There, Judson, it's okay, Emily," moving us apart, excusing me because I'd suffered a loss, too. They wanted me to go home, and I was ready.

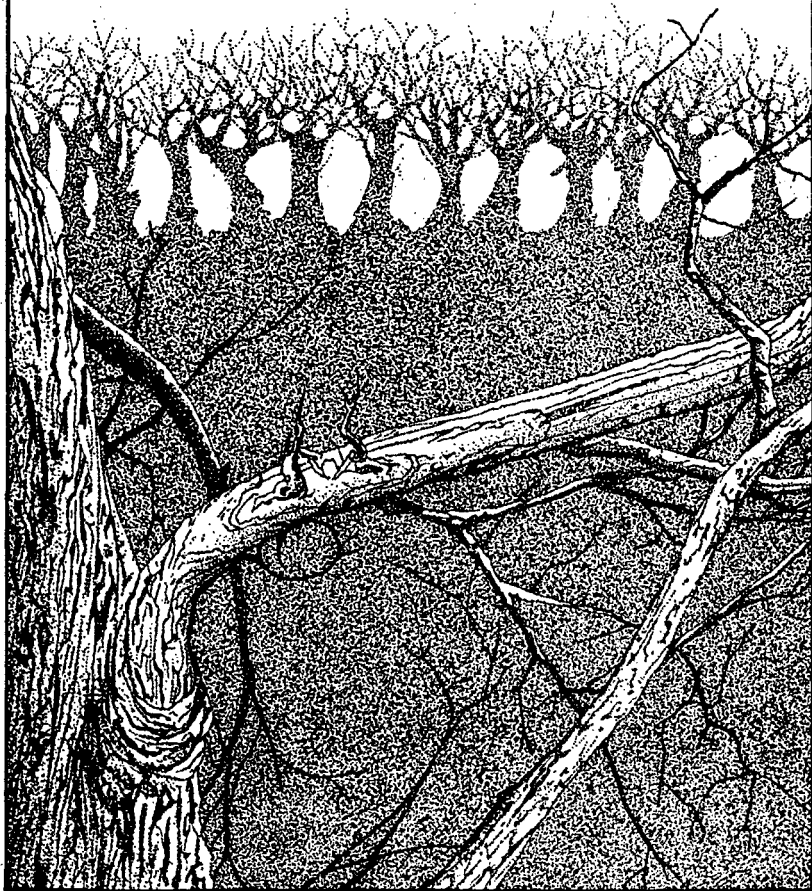
"You should never have let her take up with him!" Judson cried as I started for the door. "It's your fault! You should have stopped her!"

I wished with all my heart that I had. She'd be alive today. But I never knew how to stop Anni from doing anything.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE SHOT THAT WAITED

Vincent Cornier



**I**n the calculation an allowance has to be made for the Gregorian Correction of the calendar in 1752. Then it becomes apparent that the time elapsed between the firing of that bullet and its plunge into Westmacott's body was exactly two hundred and twenty-two years, two months, one week, five days, twelve hours and forty-seven minutes . . .

The dueling pistol from which it was shot was fired by Ensign the Honorable Nigel Koffard. He was a young officer in one of Marlborough's crack squadrons and had but recently homed to England after the decisive bloodiness of Malplaquet. The man whom his shot wounded two hundred-odd years after was Mr. Henry Leonard Westmacott, a branch cashier of the London and Southern Counties Bank.

Nigel Koffard pressed the trigger of that pistol, in the park of Ravensham Hall, Derbyshire, at precisely eight o'clock on the radiant morning of August the second, 1710.

Henry Westmacott was sitting by his own hearthside in the drawing room of The Nook, Bettington Avenue, Thornton Heath, Surrey, when Koffard's bullet struck him and shattered his right shoulder. He had just settled down—on the dismal and rainy night of October the twenty-third, last year—intending to listen to a concert broadcast from the Queen's Hall. The ball hit him as the BBC announcer was concluding an apology for the program's being late by saying: "It is now eight forty-seven, and we are taking you straight over—"

Thus was the second time most accurately determined.

All the day long, young Mrs. Westmacott had been anxious about their little boy, Brian. He was running a slight temperature.

Hence she no sooner had dinner ended when she needs must go up to the nursery. In the swift way of tummy-troubled baby boys, Brian had contrived to lose his pains. He was sleeping serenely.

Pamela Westmacott smiled ruefully as she rearranged his cot clothes . . .

The shot, the groan, and the stumbling fall among the fire irons all sounded on that instant. With mechanical acumen Mrs. Westmacott also noted that some china crashed to ruin in the kitchen and that the opening chords of the symphony orchestra's performance were lost to a thud and a sudden silence.

She rushed down the stairs to collide with her maidservant, who had burst with almost equal speed from her domain.

"Oh, ma'am! Wh-what in the name o'glory's happened?"

"Hush, Biddy, and stay there! I—I'll see what's the matter."

Westmacott had raised himself to his knees and was delicately pawing at his right shoulder:

"Henry! Henry—darling!" Pamela Westmacott was down beside him. "What's gone wrong?" Then she saw the sodden red horror of his shoulder. "Oh, my poor old boy! . . . *Biddy*—phone Dr. Smithers and the police. Tell them to hurry. Say Mr. Westmacott has been shot!" When doctor and police arrived, Westmacott had been got to bed. He was fully conscious and calm, despite his excruciating pain. His wife had managed him in a way that won Dr. Smithers' admiration. Smithers turned to her with a smile as he unscrewed the nozzle of the syringe with which he had administered an opiate.

"Sensible woman, Mrs. Westmacott! You made everything very easy. . . . What's that? . . . *Dangerous*? Oh no, not at all. Direct compound fracture of the scapula socket and a flake chipped off the head of the humerus. Painful, but that's all."

Old Smithers patted her hands and definitely pressed her to the door. "Now run along and leave hubby to me. Go down and satisfy the curiosity of those exceedingly impatient policemen. Above all, don't—worry."

The police were certainly impatient. Their cross-examination had foundered poor Biddy. After their dismissal of her she had gone back to the kitchen to blubber among the neglected crockery.

In Mrs. Westmacott was discovered harder and less hysterical material. She told them all she knew. Essentially because it tallied so exactly with Biddy's account, the officers became more and more confounded. . . .

"But are you absolutely *sure*, Mrs. Westmacott, no one came out of this room as you rushed down the stairs? Or slipped out by the front door?"

"Oh dear, how many more times must I tell you? No!" Wearily she smoothed her forehead. "Who could have done so?"

"Whoever fired that shot," grunted Inspector Ormesby. "There's no weapon to be found. The windows are all properly secured. There isn't any glass broken. Your husband wasn't potted at by someone lurking in the garden—that's self-evident. And he couldn't possibly have shot himself." The inspector nodded toward the radio cabinet which the bullet had struck. "The position of his



wound and the subsequent flight of the missile settles *that*. . . . Somebody shot him. Then who was it?"

A plainclothes officer turned from his inspection of the damaged cabinet. He had been penciling notes referring to the tarnished ball of lead which showed itself, half-embedded, in the seven-ply veneered woodwork. It had struck a spot directly in front of a radio tube, and the impact had been sufficient to shatter filaments, so stopping reception.

This man's talking was far less truculent than that of Inspector Ormesby. But it was deadlier.

"You've told us that the front door was locked for the night. Have I got that right?"

"Yes, you have."

"I noticed that a little brass bolt is on the inner side of the door. Then there's the main lock and a Yale latch. All of 'em secured?"

"No. The key of the big lock wasn't turned, but the bolt was pushed home. Naturally the latch held as well."

"Had you to open those to let us in?"

"I had."

The plainclothesman watched her through half-closed eyes.

"Now, you remember you also told us that you came helter-skeltering down the stairs at such a rate that you bumped into this Bridget O'Hara woman at the bottom. And she'd just flown out of the kitchen?"

"Perfectly correct. When the shot was fired, Biddy dropped a plate or something. Then she rushed here. We—we converged on the room."

"No one went out of the door." It seemed that the plainclothesman was musing aloud. "No one, so you say, went up the stairs past you. No one could have doubled out by way of the kitchen, and no one could have doubled out of here back into the dining room or into the cupboard under the stairs, without you or your servant's seeing 'em. . . . *Um-m-m!*" He paused, and ignored Mrs. Westmacott completely, to smile past her at Inspector Ormesby. "*And no weapon found,*" he slowly murmured. "You carry on here, inspector. Strikes me I'll have to have another heart-to-heart talk with our faithful Bridget."

Pamela Westmacott flinched as though a viper had reared itself before her eyes as she watched the inimical C.I.D. man saunter from the room. Mad as it seemed, fantastic and unreal as it was, nevertheless she realized she was the suspect here.

\*

Now let interpolation be made of the somewhat astounding experience of an official police photographer, called Coghill.

A genial little fellow, Egbert Coghill; a craftsman of infinite patience and capability. He was the man who went to The Nook the next day and, acting on police instructions, set about securing photographs of the drawing room and, more especially, the bullet-splintered radio set.

Cheerily, with an incessant whispering whistle, he moved about and made himself quite at home. He dumped his big camera on a table. The black leather case that contained his plates in their mahogany slides he placed in front of the radio cabinet. Still softly whistling, he pottered around, making his notes and selecting his objects and angles.

Thereafter he erected his camera and made various long exposures. He took photographs of the door, the windows, the blood-stained rug, the untidy hearth, and the armchair in which Westmacott was sitting when he was wounded. After these Coghill concentrated on his most important work. He removed his plate carrier from its place in front of the radio set and focused on the half-embedded bullet and the starry matrix wherein it lay. He expended his remaining four plates on this.

When he came to the development of his material, Coghill was astonished and alarmed. Without exception, each dripping negative held—superimposed on its actual detail—a wee portrait of something that appeared to be an astronomical portrait view of the planet Saturn. These were ring-impounded orbs which had a quality of eerie brilliancy that had struck the plates with something amounting almost to halation. Yet they were mottled by shadows of an intensity and a delicacy Mr. Egbert Coghill had never previously developed out of any sensitive emulsion.

More than this phenomenon, the four exposures of the radio cabinet were useless. These, which should have been Coghill's acme, not only bore the eerie imprint of the tiny incandescent "planet," but a great maelstrom of fog about the place where the bullet should have been. The cabinet was clear enough. Only that area which should have been occupied by a representation of the leaden slug was at fault.

Mr. Coghill equipped himself with another camera and a new assortment of plates. Back he went to the drawing room of The Nook. He duplicated his previous exposures and again developed them.

None of this second group of negatives showed the Saturnlike globe. Equally, none of the seven plates he had, secondarily, exposed on the cabinet front was in any better state than the former four. Except for the nonappearance of the queer orb, there were the identical coils of fogginess about the splintered woodwork—and *no sign of the bullet*.

Mr. Egbert Coghill made a number of prints from all these negatives. Together with his notes and the plates themselves, he gave them into police keeping. This done, he fared forth and drank deeply.

Without much loss of time those photographs went, by way of Scotland Yard, to a Home Office department in Whitehall: to Barnabas Hildreth. He studied them and puzzled over them, as he afterwards told me, until he was sick to death of the very sight of them. Bewildered, Barnabas then interviewed the Westmacotts.

The unfortunate Henry had nothing of much value to relate. He had been reading, he said, and had just put aside his evening paper to listen to the broadcast. As he leaned back in his chair, he heard a curiously violent hissing as of air escaping from a pin-punctured tire. Then there was a detonation and a fiery, enormous blow at his shoulder.

He scouted the idea that anyone could have been in the room with him without his knowledge. And on the subject of the police theory—that his wife had shot him and, in collusion with Bridget O'Hara, had thereafter established an incontestable alibi—he was sardonically and sulphurously vehement. When he discovered Hildreth so far agreed with him under that head as to veto further official browbeating, Westmacott became a different man. He was so relieved, so pathetically relieved, that Hildreth was touched—actually was humanized sufficiently to accept an invitation to stay for tea!

So it came about that the grim intelligence service officer and Master Brian Westmacott became friends. Hildreth chuckled over this.

"There was no resisting the little beggar, Ingram. He's a sturdy kid and as sensible as the deuce. No sooner had I finished examining the drawing room than he lugged me off to build what he called a 'weal twue king's palace'—from bits of wood; wood such as I've never seen a child playing with before. He had a big box full of sawn-up chair legs and rails; 'pillars' for his palace. And he'd scores of miniature arches and so forth—all shaped out of carved walnut

and mahogany and oak and elm—little blocks, battens, and angle-pieces that had originally been parts of furniture. One glance at 'em showed they were scores of years old and had come from the workshops of masters like Hepplewhite and Chippendale."

I sensed something of extraordinary import here.

"Oh, and where'd he got 'em from?"

"Out of the family woodshed. Or at least his father had." Hildreth grinned. "I looked it over—lots of the same stuff there. Y'see, Westmacott has a brother in the antique furniture trade: does restorations and repairs and so forth. Westmacott gets all the waste from his brother's workshops. The likely bits he cuts up to add to Brian's collection of blocks and pillars. The remainder is burned.

"While I was in the drawing room, old man—" he deliberately went off at a tangent—"I poked that bullet out of the radio set and took a pair of calipers to it. It's a pistol ball right enough. But where in the name of glory did it come from? And, who cast it—and when?"

"Who cast it?" I echoed. "What, isn't it an ordinary revolver slug?"

"Mass-produced?" Barnabas rubbed his hands together in glee. "Not on your life! It's as big as a marble and perfectly spherical. And it has marks on it that only the closure of a beautifully accurate bullet mold could have made. More than that. It's of an unusual caliber—one so unusual that it opens up a tremendous field of conjecture, yet at the same time defines the narrowest of tracks. A track, indeed, that a fool could follow.

"Calibers of firearms," he softly stated, "are not little matters left to individual discretion, Ingram. They're registered and pedigreed better than bloodstock—at least, in this country. Ever since 1683 any armorer or gunsmith drilling a new size of bore has had to deposit a specimen barrel and exact measurements with the Tower authorities before he could fit it to a stock or sell or exploit it in any way.

"Remembering that, I asked for records to be searched. The answer is, that ball was cast to be shot out of only two particular types of weapons. It's of a size that's quite obsolete today. Either it could have been shot from a long gun, registered in London by Adolph Levoisier of Strasbourg in 1826, or out of a dueling pistol fashioned by Gregory Gannion, a gunsmith who had an establishment in Pall Mall between 1702 and 1754.

"The exact date of Gannion's application for a license to put on

the market a weapon of a new type and caliber which he called 'an excellently powerful small-arm, for the practise of the duel, or in other uses, for delicacy and swiftness of discharge in defence or offence' . . . was February the ninth, 1709. And according to all accounts, the bloodthirsty young bucks of that day went daffy about it. Y'see, it was the first 'hair-trigger' pistol on the market: ugly but useful.

"I'm working up from that. I've a shrewd idea that good English lead wouldn't come out of a Continental long gun. No, a Gannion dueling pistol seems indicated."

I am getting ever more used to Barnabas Hildreth's tortuous tricks. The queerly precise ordination of those words, "good English lead," made me curious.

"How does one determine the nationality of—er—lead?" I asked.

"All as easily as one differentiates between a Chinaman and a Zulu," he sourly grinned. "By looking at it and studying it."

"According to the assay notes furnished me this morning, the lead from which that ball was cast came from one particular area of Derbyshire—and *nowhere else!* What's more, it's almost pure native stuff"—his face shone with some inner ecstatic light—"and so absolutely unique . . . that it's worth its weight, and more, in gold. In fact, if the fervors and excitements of the metallurgical chemists are anything to go by—and they're simply frazzling over it—it's the clue to a pretty fat fortune for someone!"

He got up then and calmly stalked across to my tantalus and mixed whisky and sodas. Then he challenged me across the brim of his glass.

"Well, old man, all the best! And here's to the speedy solution of one of the neatest mysteries I've struck for months."

So far as I recollect, it was two days later that Hildreth descended on me. He wanted me to go to Thornton Heath with him, and I went. We visited the premises occupied by Westmacott's brother Ralph—Westmacott and Company, Ltd.: "Antique Furniture Restored, Renovated, Repaired, and Reproduced."

Admittedly Ralph Westmacott had certain specimen pieces in his workshops. These were the magnificent possessions of connoisseurs, to whom the factor of financial worth hardly counted. They were all undergoing tiny but incredibly painstaking forms of restoration, and guarded jealously for the treasures they were.

However, as Hildreth said, these were not our meat. Westmacott

took us to the larger, general workshop. Here we saw really valuable, but ordinary, examples of olden furniture in the processes of repair and "faking."

"We pride ourselves," Westmacott told us, "on our ability to replace a faulty participle with a sound one, so meticulously reproduced and fitted—grafted on, one might say—that no one outside first-flight experts can detect the addition."

"That, of course, necessitates," smoothly came Hildreth's question, "your carrying an amazing stock of old cabinet-making woods, I presume?"

Westmacott looked curiously at my friend.

"Aye, amazing is the word," he laughed. "Come and have a look."

He preceded us to a vast loft that was filled by racks and shelving—and all of them packed with broken parts of old fashioned furniture.

"Here you are," he exulted, "from Tudor to Early Victorian; from linen-fold paneling to pollard oak sideboard doors . . . gathered together from the auction rooms of half the globe. We couldn't carry on a day without 'em. Unless similar old stuff is used on replacement jobs—"

"Stuff like this, for instance," Hildreth interrupted to point at a great stack of dirty wood, looking to me like huge half-cylinders of amber-flecked bog oak: split tree trunks. "This lot seems to be pretty ancient."

Ralph Westmacott moved delicately to Hildreth's side.

"Aye," he concurred, "it's old enough. That wood's been buried in the earth for a century and more."

Brightly, blandly, almost with the alert cockiness of a schoolboy, Barnabas Hildreth replied, "I don't doubt that for a moment, Mr. Westmacott. They're elmwood water conduits, aren't they? And judging from their boggish appearance, they've come out of country where there's plenty of peat about."

Ralph Westmacott scratched his grizzled hair.

"Yes, they *are* conduits, and they certainly came out of peaty loam—from Derbyshire, as a matter of fact. We've men on the job up there now. They came from Ravensham Park, near a place called Battersby Brow . . . we bought the whole line of wooden water pipes that used to serve the hall and the village."

Grimly enough Hildreth chuckled.

"What a game it is!" he dryly stated. "Now, 'Battersby Brow,' in

Derbyshire—" he was jotting down these particulars in a notebook—"and 'Ravensham Park,' you say?"

"Yes, that's all correct." Westmacott seemed puzzled.

"And this hall you mentioned?"

"Ravensham Hall, the residence of General Sir Arthur Koffard."

Hildreth put away his book and began to fumble among the blackened elmwood.

"Might I have a chunk to take away with me?" he inquired. "I want it for certain experiments that have to be made." Westmacott nodded. "And will you ratify this? Certain lumps of this wood that you knew would be useless for your work you gave to your brother Henry, didn't you?"

"I—I did! What's the—"

"That's right. I thought I recognized the stuff again. I saw some in his woodshed." Hildreth smiled. "Thanks!"

With that we went back to London.

From the Black Bull at Battersby Brow in Derbyshire, a letter came to me on October twenty-ninth:

*My dear Ingram,*

*If you can leave your moldy rag to look after itself for the weekend, come over here and be interested. Of all the intricate bits of work I've ever struck, this is the trickiest! Don't let me down, old chap. I promise you a really noble denouement for the mystery of the Westmacott bullet: an ending that, I suppose, you'll stick on one of your scandalous chronicles of my cases and complacently claim as your own.*

*Sincerely,  
B. H.*

So I set out for Battersby Brow and the Black Bull as soon as I put my paper to bed in the early hours of Friday, the thirty-first. At nine o'clock the next morning I was in a beautiful and brilliant country of whistling airs and mighty hills.

Over breakfast, Barnabas crowed mightily.

"Done a lot of work since I saw you, old man! Only one tiny copingstone to be put on, and the job's complete.

"It was a Gannion dueling pistol that fired that ball. I've seen it. There's a pair of 'em, and they've been laid away in a case since 1710. . . . One was discharged. The other was loaded, but I got per-



mission to draw the charge. I drew it right enough!" He chuckled. "D'you know, it was a curious experience. There I had in hand another ball, similar to the one that wounded Westmacott. And there were tiny, tattered fragments of a newspaper that had been used for a wad between bullet and powder—an issue of the *Northern Intelligencer* for August the first, 1710.

"The Koffards of Ravensham Hall have been awfully decent about everything. At first they were inclined to be standoffish, but when I told old General Koffard the story you know, he tucked into things like a good 'un."

"Sorry to butt in, Barnabas—but, tell me, what story *do* I know? It occurs to me that I've only a few strikingly dissimilar and baffling incidents in mind, all hazily mixed up with lead that's 'worth its weight in gold' and old elm logs which you proved had come from this district."

Hildreth lit a cigarette.

"Listen, old man, and follow me carefully. . . . Go back in thought to the night of the twenty-third. You have Westmacott sitting in his chair. A bullet, apparently fired out of the void, strikes his shoulder and is deflected into the radio set. Point the first to be made: direction of bullet's flight proved it was shot from somewhere in the region of Westmacott's feet. Got that?" I surveyed the scene in mind. . . . I had to agree. "Now for point the second. Had a ball of that size possessed a high velocity, it'd have made the dickens of a mess of the humerus. It'd have caused a comminuted fracture and, without much doubt, it would have glanced across and gone through his throat.

"But no, it was a missile of low velocity—only a direct compound fracture of the scapula socket and a lazy glide off, to smack the front of the radio set.

"No one can say where the ball came from. The ineffable Egbert Coghill goes to photograph it. . . . He puts his plate carrier dead in front of the set, incidentally in front of the old bullet. For fully a quarter of an hour he footles about; then, when he comes to take his photographs, he carries on each plate he afterwards exposes a portrait of the ball, transmitted by its own power through the leather case, through the whole clutter of his mahogany slides, and, in fact, through everything within eighteen inches of the radio cabinet!"

I jumped at that.

"D'you mean those Saturnlike globes were—"

"Photographs of that ball! *Precisely!* It emitted a short, hard ray of far more intensity than the usual X-ray apparatus employs!"

"But how could that come about?"

"*Pitchblende*," said Barnabas Hildreth, "that's why! Apart from certain areas in Cornwall, only the Peak district of Derbyshire and some isolated caverns round about Ingleborough in Yorkshire have pitchblende deposits. Usually it's in association with lead that has a high silver content. . . . The assay of that ball not only showed lead and silver, but definite traces of pitchblended striations, all melted together.

"To clinch that part of the business, however—" Hildreth glanced at the time "—remember that the second batch of Coghill's prints did *not* show the eerie little 'planet.' That was because he did not bung his plate carrier in front of the radio set on his second venture. The active emissions were powerless outside a small range.

"But neither set of plates would betray anything except a foggi-ness where the bullet should have been. What could you reasonably expect?" Hildreth shrugged. "A long exposure, with powerful lens concentrating radium rays on a speedy photographic emulsion—nothing but fog *could* result!"

In the end I realized that Hildreth was right. Radioactive properties in that leaden slug would explain everything. Incidentally I caught the drift of what he meant when he spoke about the value of the bullet and its potentiality as the clue to a fortune.

"Do you mind—" Hildreth was on his feet and again looking at his watch "—if we hustle? We've a walk of a few miles if we're to get that copingstone set, y'know. And I want it done today."

That long tramp across the sage-green acres of the Derbyshire countryside terminated in the park of Ravensham Hall. A group of navvies, excavating a snākish trench, paused in their work and watched us curiously. And from out of a nearby hut a podgy and bespectacled man clad in a white coat and an old iron-haired fellow with a face of claret came to greet us. One was a chemist called Sowerby, and the elder man was Major General Sir Arthur Koffard.

"Well, Sowerby," Hildreth briskly questioned when introductions were completed, "had any luck?"

Sowerby smiled unctuously and beckoned us back to the hut. In there he pointed to a fire-clay retort that glowed above a fierce petrol-air lamp. Around the squat nozzle of the retort a big plume of intensely blue and brilliant flame was glowing.

"Yes, Mr. Hildreth, your surmise was right enough. It's methyl hydride, without a doubt." He pointed to the halcyon fire. "Almost pure, to burn like that."

"Most 'strordinary—most 'strordinary thing," this was the crisp clacking of Koffard, "'tha' one can live a lifetime, 'mong things like these, an' never know—never know. 'Course, this land's been full o' will-o-th'-wisp lights for years, but one never stops to give 'em much thought."

Barnabas abstractedly nodded and walked out. We followed him to the side of the trench. For a long while he studied the enormous hollow trunks that the navvies had dug out of the black and oozy earth.

"Magnificent trees," he muttered. "Veritable giants! Took some labor, I should say, to gouge their innards out!" Then he turned to Koffard and asked him something about a map.

"Aye, I've got it here." The rattle-voiced old officer produced a tin cylinder and drew out of it a scroll inscribed by rusted lines of ink. "The avenue stood across there. Nigel Koffard fought his duel—" he pointed to a level sward forty yards away—"just on that patch. At the beginning of the avenue, exactly."

When we went to this place, we could plainly see a series of little hummocks stretching, in parallel, for almost half a mile. It was explained to me that here had been a hundred and more elms making a great avenue that was felled in 1803—under each knoll was a mighty stump. The trunks, hollowed out, had gone into the formation of that pipeline (for conveying drinking water from a hillside spring) the navvies were excavating.

Hildreth stopped exactly on the spot on which one Nigel Koffard had taken his stance to fight a duel on the morning of August the second, 1710.

"Now, Sir Arthur," Hildreth murmured, "let's work things out. Your ancestor challenged his cousin to a duel, primarily over the intentions of that cousin toward your ancestor's sister. When the affair came to its head, Nigel Koffard was fully determined to put a ball through his cousin. But that doughty lad, conscious of honor and innocence, did not so much as lift his own pistol. Refused, point-blank, to defend himself.

"Tha's right; quite right!" Koffard applauded. "He must ha' had guts, y'know—simply stood there. Completely broke Nigel's nerve."

"And the said Nigel," Hildreth grinned, "thereupon did a bit of quick thinking. It dawned on him that he had misjudged his man.

So, to show his regret and to extend an olive branch, he turned and fired his bullet straight into the nearest elm. Whereupon the youngsters shook hands. The cousin got permission to marry Nigel's fair sister, and the Gannion dueling pistols—one discharged and the other loaded—were put back in their case and guarded thereafter, for the sake of the episode, as family heirlooms."

"Precisely, sir!" said General Koffard. "Admirably put, sir!"

"Then, if that's so—" Hildreth was already on the move—"we'll trouble that invaluable plan of yours once again. Now we want to see this place called Skelter's Pot, where lead was mined in those days."

... We tramped a full mile up a mountainous slope and were eventually rewarded by the view of a bite into a pinkish face of spar, which the old map told us was "Skelter's Pot."

"Out of here," Sir Arthur Koffard told us, "came all the lead used hereabouts. The hall is roofed by it."

Hildreth took a geologist's hammer from his pocket and knocked away at a piece of semitranslucent quartz in which dull gray patches showed and on which strangely green filaments were netted.

"I would like," he softly returned as he put this specimen away, "to own your roof! At a modest estimate it'll be worth more than the hall and this estate put together."

"Now, you see, old chap—" Hildreth tapped the rough pencil sketch he had made—"this was the way of it." I leaned across the table, and under the steady oil-lamp light of the old Black Bull, I looked at the drawing. "Here we've all we need."

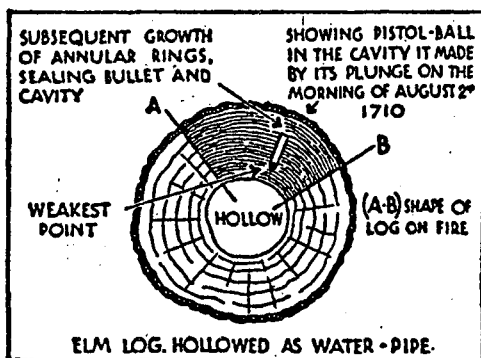


DIAGRAM OF THE ELM LOG BURNT IN THE CASHIER'S FIRE.

"When Nigel Koffard shot that ball, at closest range, into the living elm tree it made a deep cavity, a tunnel, in which it stopped. In a few more years a 'rind-gall' was formed. The elm closed over the wound in its structure by a growth of annular rings. The cylindrical little tunnel remained, and the ball remained.

"Then our elm showed signs of what is called 'doatiness'—incipient decay. It, together with all the others in the avenue, was felled, hollowed-out, and used for an aqueduct. Y'see, old man, elm is the *one* wood which never changes if kept constantly wet.

"This is a queer countryside, Ingram. And the elm is a queer tree. Get those facts in mind.

"That chamber which held the bullet also held the gases of the elm's former disruption, and to these were added those similar gases which lurk in peaty land. 'Similar,' did I say? *Identical* would be a better word. . . . You heard old Koffard talk about marsh gas; natural gas, that is. . . . Well, that's what we're considering. You saw that chemist fellow, Sowerby, with a retort full of elmwood burning such gas at the mouth of the apparatus.

"Methyl-hydride; methane; carbureted-hydrogen—call it what you will, and still you're right—is marsh gas. Also it's the dreaded and terribly explosive thing which miners call firedamp . . . when mixed with air.

"You see it burning away in every fireside in the land. It's the illuminating property of coal. And it always results when bodies of a peaty, woody, or coaly constituent are subjected to great heat."

I began to have an inkling of what Hildreth was getting at.

"However, to the mechanics of the situation." He laughed and drank some beer. "Ralph Westmacott, the furniture man, buys some old weathered elmwood from Derbyshire in order to fake his manufactures. What he has to spare—useless—he gives, as usual, to his brother, Henry Leonard. Our good Henry Leonard diligently saws it up into chunks and fills the family woodshed.

"Now comes a rainy and dismal October night. Henry puts a log on the open-hearth fire, extends his slippered feet, and prepares to enjoy the evening.

"But the wild mystery of the ever-burgeoning earth comes into the simple household of The Nook and claims him. . . . He hears a violent hiss. That was air rushing into the vascular tissue of that hot elm log, combining with the incredible chemistry of Nature with the terrible potential of that hydrocarbon *methane*, in the *hol-low* where the bullet lay concealed.

"Nigel Koffard's powder had not half the fulminating property in the steel barrel of his pistol that firedamp had in the smooth wound of the elm log. . . . Pressure increased, since the hollow was filling every second with more and more gas, and air was in combination with it. At last the hungry fire, eating away the inner face of the log, reached the terribly explosive mixture. Then *bang*, up and outwards shot the ball into Henry's shoulder.

"So we're back at our beginning—the very first point I made: that the ball was fired from somewhere about Westmacott's feet. I recalled flying fragments of coal and co-related things . . . allowing, always, for the unusual.

"But instead of coal and cinders, the well of the grate was filled with half-burned fragments of wood—like fragments of furniture, surmounted by a big tricorned hunk of charred elmwood. I wondered, vastly, about those fragments. Then, when I saw the little boy, Brian, playing with his homemade building blocks, I was definitely set on the second line which led me to solution."

He picked up his tankard and smiled.

"That green network you saw on the surface of that spar was pitchblende! I'm told it's more than usually rich in radium and uranium salts.

"The land on which Skelter's Pot is situated belongs to the commissioners. It's an open common land. Anyone procuring the necessary faculty, and entering into serious negotiations, can mine it. . . . So, with the joyous approval of Mr. Henry Leonard Westmacott, I have entered my innocent ally Master Brian's name on our list—"

"'Our list?'" I was puzzled by his most deliberate pause. "What list?"

"Oh, the little company I'm forming: myself, yourself, Koffard, Westmacott, and young Brian, to exploit the pitchblende deposits of our property in Skelter's Pot, Derbyshire." He laughed and stretched his arms. "It ought to provide for us in our old age, if nothing else."

. . . Judging by my latest returns from that adroitly contrived concern, I am inclined, stoutly, to agree.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**J**acket blurb comparisons of J. D. Christian's *Scarlet Women* (Signet, \$5.99) to Caleb Carr's bestseller *The Alienist* aren't far from the truth. Christian's period novel of old New York is set in 1871, close enough to the Civil War for many of its scars to be visible still. One of these marks the face of a dashing, self-possessed, and somewhat mysterious character known to his fellow denizens only as Harp. Harp makes a comfortable if occasionally dangerous living learning secrets for some people and keeping secrets for others. When the body of a prostitute is found wearing the clothes of a well-to-do matron who is supposed to be doing the Grand Tour of Europe, the worried husband hires a law firm, which in turn hires Harp to investigate. Along the way, readers are treated to a wealth of historical detail as the story covers the winding streets of Manhattan, the ferries in a blizzard, the myriad dry canals that lie beneath the oldest and seamiest parts of the city, and the halls of the Tweed bureaucracy, where a scandal threatens to blow up in a number of prominent faces. At last, even Harp's deepest secret will be revealed to the one he loves from afar. This is great fun.

Kay Hooper has written a compelling novel of romantic suspense for fans of Phyllis Whitney. *After Caroline* (Bantam, \$21.95) opens when Joanna Flynn survives a car accident—twice. Her near-death experience has left her with haunting dreams of a house on a seaside cliff and the image of a small girl who needs her help. When she is “recognized” by two strangers who call her “Caroline,” Joanna uses her researcher's skills to locate an obituary for another young woman, one who did *not* survive a car accident that took



place at the same time Joanna's did but two time zones away. So Joanna takes some vacation and goes off to the charming resort town of Cliffside, Oregon, hoping to both satisfy her curiosity and put her dreams to rest. Her visit, however, triggers something very disconcerting in many of those who knew the late Caroline best, and Joanna may have put herself in line for the next fatal accident. Only her growing sense of some danger directed at Caroline's little girl keeps Joanna on the scene. An intriguing premise and engaging characters make this novel go down as easy as a box of chocolates.

In the course of twelve books starring police chief Mario Balzic, K. C. Constantine has given mystery fans tight, character-driven tales set in the fictional blue-collar mining town of Rocksborg, Pennsylvania. In his latest, **Family Values** (Mysterious Press, \$22), Mario is now retired, and the time that hangs heavily on his hands is also causing tension at home. When a Philadelphia district attorney offers the ex-chief a job investigating an old and politically sensitive case, Mario accepts. He is to interview several prison inmates who have recanted their old testimony concerning a drug deal seventeen years earlier, one that ended with two men dead and a sheriff's son imprisoned for life for the crimes. Now that the old sheriff is dying, the victim of a severe stroke, his son claims that he was framed for the two murders. The D.A. hired Balzic because he has a reputation for being honest, law-abiding, and apolitical. What Mario uncovers when he begins to dig around in his fellow sheriff's back yard (both figuratively and literally) would shatter most men's faith in their profession. Much to the D.A.'s chagrin, it brings Mario out of retirement with a vengeance. Don't look here for danger and excitement, but don't be surprised either if you find yourself gulping this down at a single sitting.

John Dunning's novels about the book business have earned him plaudits, so his publisher has reissued an earlier novel about the newspaper business. **Deadline** (Pocket, \$5.99) stars a restless, Pulitzer-winning reporter named Dalton Walker, who at present is working for a mid-sized paper outside of New York City. A small traveling circus burns, and the body of an eight-year-old girl is found in the smoldering ruins of the big tent. When no one claims the body, Walker begins to dig into what he believes will turn out to be a story. He is right, but what he knows will also put him in the eye of a storm that will send him (accompanied by an Amish woman who left home to become a dancer) across the country at

gunpoint. The question here becomes who can he trust; the answer is almost no one. Strong writing and some unusual settings set this apart.

Tami Hoag's latest, **A Thin Dark Line** (Bantam, \$22.95), gives her readers another long, well populated, and intricately plotted suspense novel that should please fans of her bestselling *Guilty As Sin* and *Night Sins*. The setting is a parish in Louisiana. The novel opens in a courtroom, where a man known to have stalked a young woman and now accused of her brutal slaying is set free due to a legal technicality. Deputy Annie Broussard isn't willing to let it go at that. Nor, as it turns out, are several others in that courtroom. But for Annie it will mean attracting the attention of a proved stalker, defying orders, and forming a secret working alliance with a brilliant but secretive Cajun cop named Fourcade. And for both of them it will be a journey into some of the darkest impulses we know of: vengeance, obsession, and murder in the name of love. This is a big read, lush in its details and overflowing with complicated and sophisticated characters.

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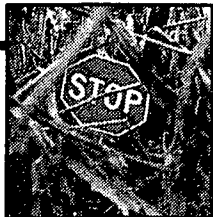
(continued from page 4)

ster's Arms. "Beautiful spot, backing onto the river Dart. The place has since been taken over by Floyd of TV fame." Later, Mr. Coney went to the West Indies to manage a hotel and nightclub in Antigua. "If you've ever read Herman Wouk's *Don't Stop the Carnival* you'll know what it was like. A major screwup every day. Drains backing up, chronic absenteeism, power outages,

droughts, hurricanes, weird guests, strong unions, inoperative telephones, unsanitary kitchens, we had it all. We'd put on shows with entertainers like Percy Sledge, and we'd want the police there to control the crowd, but they couldn't come because their car had broken down. So we'd fetch them ourselves. They'd melt into the audience, and that would be the last we'd see of them."

# THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious by Candida B. Korman of able mentions go to Robert gan; Richard M. Millard of of Bryan, Texas (for two en- Vermont; Nils V. Bockmann setts; Lesa Neace of Whites- Slater of Dearborn Heights, Michigan; Timothy Lambert of Bloomfield Hills, Michi- gan; Robert Avey of Boalsburg, Pennsylvania; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, Cal- ifornia; and Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire.



Photograph contest was won New York, New York. Honor- Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michi- Whitehall, Ohio; J. F. Peirce tries); Lois Parent of Bristol, of Centerville, Massachu- burg, Kentucky; Lynn John

Photo by Brian N. Cox

## FRAUD by Candida B. Korman

"Judge Hecht, would it be fraud if one of my predictions came true?" Madam Zelda asked.

It was a small town. Outside the courtroom they were Meg and Zelda and often sat on adjacent stools enjoying pancakes at the diner.

"That's a good question. Let's make it official. What will you predict?" the judge asked.

"Well, there's a storm . . ." the fortune teller began.

"And everyone in town watches the weather channel," the judge cut her off.

"This hurricane will bring a sign from the other side."

"Can't wait to see it."

Two days later the storm hit, and the town's Main Street was devastated. Madam Zelda invited the judge to see her sign from the other side.

"My house was spared! Certainly that's a sign from the great beyond."

"I've found another sign," the judge replied, and led the fortune teller to the cornfield just outside of town.

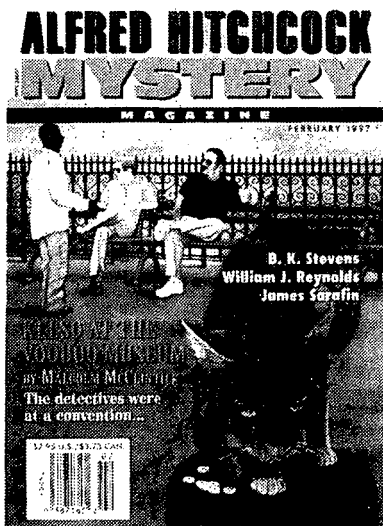
"Now, that's what I call a sign from the other side!"

The town's only stop sign had been uprooted from its home on Main Street and nestled in the jungle of cornstalks.

"It's time to give it up, Zelda. The great beyond wants you to go out of business."

Zelda walked home and took the fortune teller sign out of her window. The judge went to the chiropractor for a back adjustment. She'd had a hell of a time wrestling with a stop sign in a hurricane.

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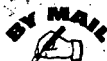
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*On days one, three and five, you'll drink the fruit cocktail, which contains juice from blackberries, white grapes, apples, pineapples, oranges and bananas.*



*On days two, four and six, you'll drink the vegetable cocktail, which contains juice from carrots, celery, tomatoes, watercress, beets, potatoes and radishes.*

\*Not all ingredients listed

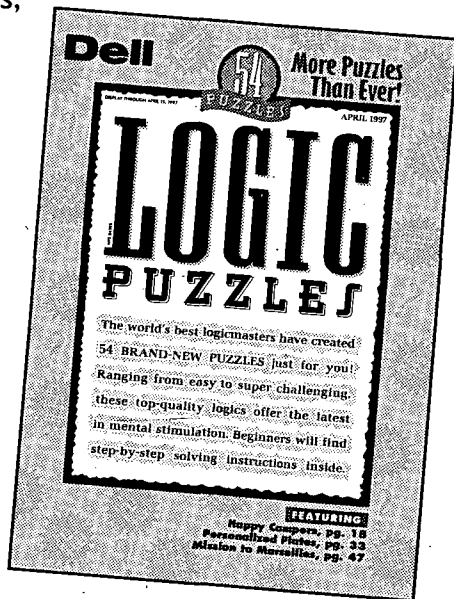
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